

ELISABETH WHEATLEY



DAINDRETH'S EMPRESS

*** BOOK 5 ***

Daindreth's Empress

by

Elisabeth Wheatley

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Chapter One

Amira

Amira Brindonu Fanduillion, empress of Eryamaya, princess of Hylendale, sorceress of the Istovari, and former Kadra'han assassin was bored.

No one had told her how much of being an Erymayan empress involved sitting and listening. They had minimized her meetings with ministers and dignitaries for the time being, but the empire had been neglected for much the past few months.

Vesha had rushed away to the north to track down her wayward son, leaving the empire in the hands of bureaucrats. It would not have been as bad if Vesha had given them a time frame, but she hadn't. As it was, decisions had been allowed to pile up. No one wanted to be the one to authorize new logging in imperial forests when the empress would be back next week.

“Approved,” Amira said, interrupting the Minister of Land. “Tell the people of Carmac that they may take what they wish from the forests.”

The minister's mouth dropped, hands tightening on his papers. “Your Grace, whatever they wish?”

Cromwell leaned over, his voice low. “Best to put limits on it, lest they start cutting down trees and selling them for profits.”

Amira realized her mistake an instant later. “Very well. No more than three trees per household.”

“Your Grace, that will encourage cutting of the greatest trees. The most precious old growth.”

Amira inhaled a sharp breath. “Tell me what you would suggest, minister.”

The minister cleared his throat, pushing his spectacles up his nose. “I would like to propose we allow them to cut one hundred trees from the forest adjoining the farmland to the south. That will be younger trees and will also expand the available farmland. It will mean hauling the trees several extra miles, but I believe it to be the best solution for all involved.”

Amira breathed slowly out her nose. “That pleases the crown. Your next case?”

Most of the forests in the empire belonged to the crown. People were free to hunt, trap, and even live in the forests, but cutting down the valuable trees was stealing from the emperor.

The township of Carmac had been hit badly by a fire that had destroyed many of the buildings in the town. The survivors had petitioned the crown to take timber from the nearby forests for rebuilding.

Amira had been hearing case after case like this all morning. They came from across the empire, from the southern lords to the far reaches of Hylendale, the Kelethian Colonies, and the Spice Islands beyond.

Amira had spent hours going over the requests and these were all just from one minister. How had Vesha not gone insane?

The minister began going into the details of his next case—a request for timber for the building of new ships. This came from Yndra. The marquis requested timber to rebuild his fleet lost in a recent earthquake.

Even Amira flinched when she heard the total of his request. “Fifty ships? He lost *fifty* ships?”

“That is what the report says, Your Grace. It seems the tidal wave that followed the quake smashed or sank many of the vessels.”

“How does he have that many ships?” Amira was not a shipwright or merchant, but she had traveled through Yndra before. It was a popular stop for merchants—and smugglers.

“They are trading vessels,” the minister answered. “Almost all of them.”

Amira arched one eyebrow. “So the marquis asks for the crown to fund the rebuilding of his personal fleet?”

The minister cleared his throat. For someone who had allegedly once served in Drystan’s army, the wiry man seemed nervous around her.

Cromwell once again rescued the man. “The Marquis of Yndra is directly responsible for at least a tenth of the trade brought in by sea. Protecting his fleet is in the best interest of the empire.” Cromwell looked back to the minister. “Though I would be surprised if he had fifty ships in the harbor at a time.”

The minister bobbed his head in hasty agreement. “I would agree. It is more likely that ten or so vessels were present.”

Amira had noticed that nobles tended to ask for far more than they needed or even expected to receive. “Approve timber for ten, in that case. He can petition us again if he wants more.”

The empress shifted her shoulders, trying to work a knot out of her back. She had taken to training with Thadred and some of Westfall’s soldiers to keep her skills sharp, but she hadn’t done much training these past weeks and her muscles protested.

“Very good, Your Grace,” the minister said, bowing and gesturing for his assistants to take note.

They were in the Empress’s Court, a smaller version of the great throne room. It had originally been intended for emperors to meet with the administrators of state. When Vesha had become empress, Drystan had spent most of his time away, expanding their empire. More often than not, Vesha had been the one left to run what they had already conquered. So what had once been the “councilors’ court” had become the Empress’s Court.

Fonra lounged nearby with the other ladies-in-waiting. One sat strumming a lyre and two busied themselves with embroidery. The princess herself sat quietly reading through a letter from home that had just arrived on a merchant's ship.

Amira itched to know what the letter said. Their father had sent one addressed to Emperor Daindreth, his new son-in-law, and one for Fonra, his youngest daughter. There had even been one addressed to Cromwell—her father's former lawyer who was now her advisor. There had been nothing addressed to Amira—his eldest and the new empress.

Amira tried not to be hurt by that. She wasn't sure why she had expected anything different.

Nonetheless, it stung to have her father ignore her even after she was now by far the most powerful—and arguably important—person in their family.

The Minister of Forests completed his stack of cases and bowed out. He set to packing up his trunks and stacks of papers, giving instructions to his pages and servants.

As soon as the doors closed after him, Amira stood from her throne—a smaller replica of the pair in the great throne room. She inhaled a deep breath.

“Father sends his regards,” Fonra said, folding the letter in her lap. “He says that your grandmother recently arrived in Hylendale and she is being afforded the highest comforts.”

Amira nodded once. Their father had said as much in his letter to her husband. “Excellent.” She looked pointedly to Cromwell. “What did yours say?”

Cromwell shrugged, something Amira didn't think she had ever seen him do. “It was regarding an introduction letter from me to the Taredicci.”

“The Taredicci?”

“The banking family, Your Grace. I handled your father's accounts with them, and he wishes an introductory letter from me introducing his new stewards.”

“Replacing you?” Amira asked.

“King Hyle does that,” said Cyne. The former queen entered with several Istovari girls on her heels. There were also a few new faces Amira recognized as minor nobles’ daughters. Cyne had assembled her own small staff to help with her duties as mother of the empress.

Cyne had taken well to life at court. She was a sorceress and had been raised to be a queen. One might say she had been better prepared for court than her daughter.

“Be flattered, Cromwell,” Cyne said. “That means he missed you when you were gone.”

Cromwell inclined his head respectfully. “My lady.”

Amira didn’t want to think about her father. If she thought about her father, she would get angry, and if she was angry, she wouldn’t think clearly. She turned to her mother. “Do you have news from Kaphen?”

“The young monk has withheld nothing from us with concern to the Fallen Goddess. But nothing so far that would help us locate the empress.”

“Assuming she’s alive,” Cromwell added.

“The gods won’t allow her to die,” Amira said confidently. “It would make me too happy.”

Cyne exhaled a long-suffering breath. “Vesha had her own Kadra’han and everything she would need to summon a familiar. It is possible she has already bonded another one.”

Amira paced a circle, thinking. Out of the corner of her eye, she watched the ladies in waiting beside Fonra.

All of them were probably spies for their own houses. That was fine. Amira wanted the great houses to know Vesha was a witch.

Witchcraft was not illegal or even forbidden in the empire. Not because it was approved, but because it was unheard of.

Most people probably wouldn't even believe it if Amira were to tell them outright.

Witches were a thing of a bygone era. They were men and women who had made bargains with cythraul in exchange for power. They had gone to war with the Istovari and the other sorceress clans and the clans had won.

According to legend, there had once been an entire order of Istovari sorcerers, the Hell Cleavers, devoted to hunting down cythraul and those who bargained with them.

But witches hadn't existed for so long, hardly anyone cared. There was very little on them by way of academic study.

Monks had been far more interested in connecting with the divine than the demonic. But it seemed that the two were not as different as one might think.

From what Kaphen had been able to tell them, Vesha had become a witch using the research of monks seeking to connect with the gods. Amira thought that made Vesha a prodigy. After all, she had achieved greater results than generations of monks had.

"If we only knew where she was," Amira muttered, more to herself.

The empire had slowly stabilized over the past weeks since Daindreth's coronation. While it would take time for the farthest reaches of the empire to hear Daindreth was back—some had still not yet heard he was gone—Erymaya was recovering.

Slowly, they were patching the empire back together. Daindreth was hard at work as was Amira and her contingent of Istovari.

Thadred and Sair spent most days doing the hard work of diplomacy. They traveled across the city and the surrounding countryside, winning over courtiers and visiting nearby vassal kings.

Daindreth would work late into the night, usually until Amira demanded he come to bed. Most nights, they both collapsed into the blankets, too exhausted for anything but sleep.

Daindreth promised her this was temporary, that things would slow down once the empire was stable again.

At least they were sharing a bed every night. That was more than most noble couples could say.

All in all, Emperor Daindreth's reign was off to a good start. But summer was almost here and still no word of Vesha.

Amira felt as if she had lost a poisonous snake in the garden. She had no way of knowing when or where the misplaced viper might appear.

“What do our reports from Iandua say? Any news?” Amira gnawed at the corner of her lip, something her mother and Fonra had both told her was bad form.

Cromwell's expression became even more grave, if that was possible. “None. Not since our last reports. We have heard that the emperor's cousins and the Countess Zeyna are safe in the countryside.”

“Count Serapio?”

“Still missing.”

Iandua was a Kelethian colony across the sea—a few days' trip. Stories had begun reaching the capital shortly before Daindreth's coronation. Stories of men with red eyes. Of rape, grisly murder, and inhuman cruelty committed by the city's inhabitants against each other.

There had been no keeping the secret. Survivors had crawled up all along the coast seeking refuge. Many citizens of the city had fled into the countryside.

But hundreds had simply...changed.

They had confirmed reports that Vesha had been in Iandua. Amira wasn't clear on what happened next, but she must have

done a summoning ritual. Hundreds of cythraul had been freed. They had taken bodies next, which Amira didn't understand.

How had Vesha been able to perform a ritual for that many to possess hosts at once? Had she found some way to circumvent rituals altogether?

If Vesha truly did have an army of cythraul, where was she? The empress had allegedly boarded a ship headed to the mainland, but that had been weeks ago. How had they not found her yet?

There was so much they didn't know.

Amira had been tempted to sail immediately to Iandua in hopes of picking up Vesha's trail. But Vesha was coming toward them.

They had doubled the patrols in the harbor and set watches along the coast, but nothing so far.

It was as if Vesha's massive fleet had simply vanished.

"What do you want, Vesha?" Amira growled. "Show yourself, you bitch."

Though she might work at ministering the forests, settling land disputes, and fulfilling the role of the imperial wife—this was Amira's true mission. Her duty was to put down Vesha.

They had sent messengers inland, warning them to search for large groups of people or signs of attack. Westfall's soldiers didn't know what they were looking for, but so far, all had returned with nothing to report.

Amira smeared a hand across her face in frustration. Vesha couldn't simply vanish, could she?

If she had been Vesha, it would have made the most sense to head straight for Mynadra after the fall of Kelamora. Best to shore up her base of power before Daindreth had been able to claim the city for himself. But as far as they could tell, Vesha was abandoning the imperial city.

“There was something in Iandua,” Amira muttered, half to herself. “Vesha was going to use the Witch’s Wheel in the gardens to release Caa Iss. There must have been...something in Iandua that could do the same.”

“Yes,” Cyne agreed. “We have discussed as much.”

“Vesha is protecting her base of power. She has to be. We assumed it would be here in Mynadra, but Vesha seems happy to let us have the capital without a fight. So where is her real power?” The young empress paced a circle, wracking her brain. “What does she want?”

“Are there any other holy sites for Moreyne?” Fonra suggested. “Any places where she would be stronger?”

Amira had considered that, but no. Exhaling, she shook her head. “Moreyne...she’s had her cults through the years, but she was never worshipped the way other gods are.”

“Might Vesha return home?” Cyne suggested. “She went to her sister first. Might she seek out her parents?”

Amira shook her head. “Unlikely. We’ve received no word of a fleet heading toward Nihai.”

“There’s no one who she might go to?” Cyne asked, heaving a heavy sigh.

“No. I have asked my husband and some of Vesha’s servants, but if they know, they aren’t speaking.” And Daindreth had forbidden her from interrogating any of the servants when she had suggested it. Questioning was acceptable, *interrogation* was not. Amira turned back to her mother. “What else has Kaphen told you lately?”

Chapter Two

Vesha

Vesha's head ached again. She had forced herself to stop drinking wine once it stopped dulling the pain. All the same, her mind remained clouded. Murky. It was as if she walked in a fever dream.

"My lady?" Caa Iss sounded almost hesitant—almost. "Are you well?"

Vesha laughed, voice breaking in a hysterical cackle. Was she well? What a foolish question. "I am leading an army of cythraul across my country. My familiar is a prince of the Dread Marches."

"*The* prince," Caa Iss corrected. "A prince of princes."

Vesha thought claiming to be a prince of the Dread Marches was much like claiming to be the prince of a dunghill or a piss pot. The claim would be undisputed because no one cared to challenge it.

Vesha went back to inspecting the ranks of cythraul. They stood in their motley collection of bodies—dozens of men, women, and children. Some hosts were barely old enough to walk. Others appeared so old and decrepit that they might have keeled over at any moment had they not made the bargains that now sustained them.

Many of the cythraul had taken hosts they fancied. Maak Kess had inhabited a beautiful young man with ruffled golden hair and a nobleman's doublet. She had always loved beautiful things.

Vesha swallowed as that thought crossed her mind. She had never been introduced to Maak Kess. She shouldn't have known that.

Vesha had noticed a number of imps now inhabited the forms of pigs. Why they seemed able to take bodies from pigs, but not other animals, Vesha didn't understand.

Vesha tripped and Odette was there, catching her arm.

“Are you well, my lady?” Odette looked her over. The young handmaiden was worn and haggard, eyes sunken and hollow.

“Fine.” Vesha pulled away from her and turned back to the ranks of cythraul.

Their ragtag group of cythraul had been camped at a farmhouse for weeks now.

Llyr had thought to inconvenience them by running their ships aground on the coast many miles from Mynadra. Vesha still wasn't sure exactly where they were, but they were somewhere with plenty of trees and farming. This farm had been the first to fall to the cythraul. The nearby village had also turned out to be easy pickings.

Many of the cythraul had found bodies there, but many had not. The hundreds of cythraul had needed weeks to collect forms from the surrounding countryside.

All the while, Vesha itched to travel. To *move*. She needed to find Moreyne's Mirror, a well of power strong enough to let the goddess through. A part of Vesha knew where it was, that same part of her that knew the names of strange demons. That part of her guided them.

Each day they were delayed was another day that Daindreth had to gain on them. Him and that woman of his.

Her daughter-in-law had most likely killed Darrigan, her closest advisor and most trusted friend. Amira had been the reason her first bargain with Moreyne had been broken. The girl was selfish. She was so in love with Daindreth that she would never see anything beyond what best served him. She had undone years of careful planning and sacrifices, yet...

Vesha didn't hate her. She wasn't sure why.

“We are ready when you give the order, my lady.” It was Araa Oon with that raspy, husky voice of his. How odd to hear

that voice from the throat of the lean farmwife he now inhabited.

Vesha looked over the ranks spread out around the clearing that made up the farmyard. “Let us go.”

Six cythraul of roughly the same height had adjusted a wooden cart they’d found in a nearby village. It was not the magnificent carriage Vesha was used to, but it would work for now. Blankets had been spread in the base and Odette had packed the water and food they could carry.

As Vesha climbed into the cart, she considered how the mighty had fallen. But oh, she would rise again. Yes, she would rise, rise—

Araa Oon marched before the ranks, hands behind his back. How that creature had gotten the cythraul into such orderly ranks, Vesha would never know.

Araa Oon raised one fist into the air. “March. Onward.”

Vesha tensed at those words. She recognized them and yet, she didn’t know the language. At least, she shouldn’t have. The sound of them was foreign, yet their meaning...

The four imps pulling the cart jerked along, following after the cythraul in front of them.

Caa Iss perched lightly on the side of the cart. His massive frame seemed far too large and yet he weighed nothing. “We are on our way,” he said with a contented movement of his shoulders. “Good.”

Vesha glared at him. Her right eye was gone, replaced with an eye torn from the skull of Moreyne herself. The god-eye throbbed, the skin around it itched.

The cart began to move. Vesha made herself as comfortable as she could against the makeshift cushions and pillows.

The ranks of cythraul moved off. The neat lines and rows Araa Oon had formed didn’t last long. The cythraul shuffled and milled together. Araa Oon didn’t even bother trying to

keep them organized, instead focusing on the rabble of imps, making sure they followed the others.

Vesha felt that she led less of an army and more of a mob. It didn't matter. They would help her complete her task for Moreyne. Then the goddess would protect the empire.

Vesha looked up to Caa Iss. "How long?"

Caa Iss glanced down at her. "Until we get there?" He glanced around. "I am not sure. The land has changed."

"No," Vesha snapped impatiently. "How long will your mother protect the empire?"

Caa Iss cocked his head, considering. "I suppose that depends."

Vesha looked past him to where Cashun and several of her other former Kadra'han walked. They had all taken on cythraul masters—because she had ordered them to.

Vesha didn't remember giving the order. More and more things seemed to slip away from her these days.

"What does it depend on?" Vesha picked at the edges of the god-eye. Her flesh was hot to the touch and puckered around it.

Caa Iss made a thoughtful sound.

Vesha got the sense he was thinking of how much to reveal. Or more likely, he was spinning lies.

"If her claim is undisputed, she might rule the empire forever."

Vesha's chest tightened at that. Forever? Might the empire be protected indefinitely?

Sometimes, Vesha could scarcely see into the next generation. Since Drystan's death, she had only hoped for continued prosperity in the rule of her successor. For there to be an everlasting peace...

"Undisputed, you say?"

The wagon hit a rock in the road and Odette jolted into Vesha. The girl straightened herself with muttered apologies.

“The other gods might try to wrest it from her,” Caa Iss said. “There are many followers of many gods in your empire. Few of them will take kindly to my mother’s rule.”

Vesha considered that. “How do we stop them?”

“You are empress of Erymaya,” Caa Iss said, as if it was obvious. “The authority you give my mother is unquestioned.”

Vesha wasn’t so sure. Something nagged at the back of her mind. “Demred has always been the patron of the Erymayan Empire.”

“And he has neglected his duties, as you have said many times.”

Vesha swallowed. She had said that. But she was not sure that Demred would see it that way.

He had always been reactive—unmatched at solving problems, but not much for preventing them in the first place.

An image flickered across Vesha’s mind of a young man with flashing teeth that could smile or just as easily bite and tear. He lounged on a stone by the edge of a waterfall, half-naked and hair plastered to his face, like he’d just been bathing.

Vesha blinked the image away. It was nothing like the patriarchal, dignified images of Demred in his temples. The young man in her mind’s eye had been too boyish, too playful. It was a far cry from how the god of vengeance was supposed to look.

So why had she pictured him that way?

A sick feeling of dread bubbled up in Vesha’s stomach, but she pushed it down. She had been seeing things—*knowing* things—for weeks now. Things she shouldn’t.

Vesha didn’t want to dwell on what they meant. “And...if the other gods do object?”

Caa Iss shrugged. “You’ve given your allegiance to my mother.”

“Then why even bring it up?”

Several of the imps tried to run ahead, their pig bodies barreling onward. At a sharp word from Araa Oon, they fell back into line.

Caa Iss made an incoherent grumbling sound. “The ruler of the land has the right to give their allegiance to a god. To abdicate, as it were.”

Vesha heard what he wasn’t saying. If rulership of the land was disputed, then the gods would also be disputed.

Leaning back against the cart, Vesha buried her head in her hands, shielding her face from the sun.

She had hoped—desperately—that perhaps this would end things. If Moreyne could protect the empire, Vesha wouldn’t have to do anything else.

Perhaps if she could free Moreyne, the goddess could protect the empire and Vesha could allow Daindreth to do as he wished. But now she realized that if Moreyne was to protect the empire, Vesha had to be the ruler.

“Caa Iss.” Vesha didn’t look up.

“Mmm?” Caa Iss sounded annoyed, but he answered. “Yes, my lady?”

“Will I have to kill my son?”

Caa Iss was quiet for too long after that. “You were willing to give him to me.” It sounded almost like a question.

“That’s different.” Vesha dropped her hands. Anger bubbled inside, mixing with the dread, fear, and disgust that had been her constant companions ever since Kelamora.

She had sacrificed a child—an innocent little girl. She’d left Darrigan, her most loyal servant and perhaps only friend, behind to die. She’d all but destroyed Iandua. Her sister’s

family had lost their father, and her sister might never see her daughters again.

All of that...

“My lady?” Odette’s voice was soft. She fretted so much over Vesha these days. “My lady, what’s wrong?”

Vesha realized she was weeping.

She had stopped the deaths of children. She had brought peace, prosperity, and justice to the empire. Never had there been as much *life* and wealth in the empire. Some had even spoken of a golden age.

Vesha knew she had saved thousands upon thousands of lives. Wars had been prevented. Famines stopped. Plagues wiped out. She had saved the empire again and again, but...

It had cost her everything.

And it was going to cost her even more.

Chapter Three

Amira

“You waited until now to tell me this?” Daindreth sighed. Lit dimly by the firelight, he ran his hands over his face.

“When should I have told you?” Amira trailed her fingers over the planes of his bare chest.

The moon was obscured tonight, but the stars shone clear, as candles in the sky. After they had consumed the better part of a wine bottle, Amira had convinced Daindreth to join her on a blanket outside the balcony.

“Sooner.” Daindreth stared up at the sky, past her.

“So we could have fought about it sooner?” Amira snuggled closer to him. She kissed his chest, her tongue following where her fingers had touched.

“Amira.” Daindreth didn’t move, but there was a rebuke in his tone.

“What?”

“Don’t try to distract me.” Daindreth shifted her so her face was closer to his. “That won’t work.”

“I know.” Amira had already learned that the hard way. It was probably for the best that Daindreth couldn’t be distracted by bed tricks and love play, but sometimes Amira wished he could. “I’m sorry, my love.”

Daindreth made a frustrated sound, but still put his arm around her. “Now explain what exactly you plan to do to Iasu.”

Iasu was a Kadra’han—Vesha’s Kadra’han. He had been tasked to hunt down Amira, Daindreth, and Thadred when they had first fled Mynadra. He had caught up with them eventually, but that confrontation had ended with him getting shot by the Istovari. They had taken him captive and had kept him prisoner in the Haven ever since.

Amira let out a long breath, knowing exactly how much Daindreth would not like it. “My mother thinks there might be a way for me to trace the Kadra’han bond. I’m powerful enough.”

“Trace the bond?” Despite his apparent anger, his hand stroked her back.

“Yes. Powerful Kadra’han can use the bond to find their masters. I will probably be able to do it myself with practice.” Amira shrugged, resting her chin in her hand.

“You started by saying you might have to kill him.” Daindreth’s tone turned stern.

“And I might,” Amira admitted. “It’s possible I can take over his bond and trace it. But that might break the bond in the process. It might also kill him.”

Daindreth blinked at her. “But there’s no risk to you?”

“No. What would kill him would be if his bond turned against him.”

Daindreth exhaled again. “You want to kill another person for my throne?”

“I don’t *want* to,” Amira countered. “But I’m willing to.”

“Are you going to kill my mother?” The question was sharp, challenging. It was almost like he was daring her to argue.

Amira opened her mouth to reply, then shut it.

“I’m not stupid, Amira.” Daindreth rested his hands on her shoulders. “You’ve never liked her.”

“I don’t see it matters if I like her,” Amira shot back. “She’s a threat to you and as such, my enemy.”

“But she’s still my mother.”

Amira made a frustrated sound, hiking up her skirts to straddle Daindreth. “I’d kill both my parents in an instant if they threatened you.”

“That’s not fair,” Daindreth said. “And you know it.”

“Do I?”

“My mother knows better than to make me choose.” His hands slid back around, resting on the small of her back. “She knows I’d choose you and you know it, too. That’s not what this is about. This is about you killing an innocent man to get to my mother.”

“You call Iasu innocent?”

“This isn’t about Iasu, either.” Daindreth stroked her back, petting her like one might pet an animal they were trying to soothe. “You were never close with your parents, or at least you don’t remember it.”

Amira rolled her eyes.

“I loved my parents.” Daindreth was quiet for a long space of heartbeats. “I still do.”

Amira had things she wanted to say, but she bit her tongue.

“My father was away often, but my mother would read me every one of his letters.” Daindreth stared past her to the stars above. “He’d sometimes add notes to us in the postscript of supply orders and imperial decrees. It was improper, of course, but he was emperor. Who was going to scold him?”

Amira felt like this was off topic but didn’t interrupt.

“He was our world, Amira. In a way I can’t explain.”

Amira had cursed Drystan for most of her life, but since meeting and now marrying Daindreth, she had become agnostic. Whether Drystan had been a good or a bad man hardly mattered. His son was a good man and protecting Drystan’s legacy was in Daindreth’s best interest.

Daindreth’s hand found its way up to the back of her neck. “The day he came home, that last time, she wept to see him. He picked me up and I wouldn’t stop hanging onto his neck. I was so afraid he would leave again.” Daindreth swallowed. “And by the end of the month, we were alone.”

Amira touched the side of his face.

“For months, my mother would send away the servants and cry for hours at a time. Holding me.” Daindreth shook his head. “A thousand forces from all sides came at her every day. I know you see the empress and the witch, but...I saw what it cost her.”

“She tried to turn you over to Caa Iss.”

“She thought she had to.”

“She stole your inheritance.”

“She built this empire every bit as much as my father did.”

Amira wasn't standing for this. “She tried to murder an innocent child. She was going to have me tortured and raped by Caa Iss. She was going to have you possessed by Caa Iss. Shall I go on?”

Daindreth didn't have a reply for that.

“What should we do with her if we won't kill her?” Amira cocked her head to the side. “Do you expect her to go quietly? To become a doting grandmother on the sidelines? Women like her do not fade into obscurity. They blaze into oblivion.”

Daindreth fixed Amira in a hard look, but he kept touching her.

Amira felt like they were both struggling to keep their connection, even as they argued.

“I don't want more bloodshed. Certainly not in my name.”

“Lover.” Amira rested one hand on the side of his face. “There will be bloodshed. And we both know it.”

Daindreth closed his eyes.

“What Vesha did in Iandua...we can't ignore that.” Amira hadn't wanted to bring that up. Daindreth had been upset for days once they had heard of the colony's fate. Rightfully so. As best they could tell, the city had been effectively sacked.

As of their last missive, thousands of people were missing. The governor of Kelethian reported that an untold number of people were either dead or possessed, with many corpses still unidentified.

“I know,” Daindreth answered quietly. “I know it.”

“I, myself, am guilty of many crimes.” Amira let off a long breath. “And you showed me mercy. I’m grateful for that, but...” Amira grasped for words. Arguing would not work. Anger would not work. She needed a different angle. “My love, your mother does not want to change. I did.”

Daindreth didn’t answer.

“She’s an axe hung over us by a thread. We can’t just leave her there.”

Daindreth shook his head. “We find her. Then we discuss what to do with her. Maybe she will surrender to us.” The way he spoke the last sentence indicated he didn’t think it likely, either.

Vesha was proud. Vesha was used to being right. She would not bow to them.

Amira thought back to her first few interactions with the empress. There had been cold civility, even an offer of alliance, but then they had split—with Amira protecting Daindreth even when Vesha offered her *more*.

Battle lines had been drawn between the two of them a long time ago. Amira had accepted Vesha as her enemy. But it seemed Daindreth had not.

“We capture her, then we decide,” Daindreth said.

“If she allows herself to be captured.” Amira highly doubted Vesha would allow herself to be taken alive. So much the better. “Of course.”

“Amira...”

The former assassin shrugged. “Do I have permission to send for Iasu? He has been moved from the Haven to my

father's dungeons. They can put him on a ship and send him here."

Daindreth groaned.

"It will help us find your mother."

"You agree to try capturing her? Not going straight for assassination?"

Amira honestly didn't know what she would do once they found Vesha. But they needed to find the woman first. "Yes."

Daindreth's eyes narrowed as he weighed her answer. "Then I will consider it." He sighed. "I know Thad is on your side."

Amira and Thadred had their differences at one time, but they tended to agree more and more, especially when it came to protecting Daindreth. "Yes. Everyone thinks Vesha should die except you."

"How inconvenient, then, that I am emperor."

Amira flattened her hands against his chest. "You are emperor." Amira had been forced to obey a king she hated for most of her life. By comparison, choosing to follow an emperor she loved was not so terrible. "You're a good man, Daindreth."

"Why do you sound so sad?" Daindreth rubbed up her bare arm.

"Good men die young." Amira believed history was proof of that. For every tyrant who had died wrinkled and gouty, there were two heroes who were buried in the flower of youth.

"Maybe I'll beat the odds." Daindreth didn't sound concerned.

Amira didn't add that good men only survived if they had bad men protecting them—or bad women.

Amira and Thadred had spoken about it at length, perhaps more than they should have. Both had agreed that if they had to, they would keep Daindreth safe no matter what happened.

They weren't just his wife and his cousin—they were his Kadra'han.

Sometimes service and obedience are two different things.

No one else could know. If people realized Daindreth's own Kadra'han went behind his back, it would make him appear weak. If Amira and Thadred chose to disobey him, to strike against Vesha, it would have to be in secret.

"I'm going to make sure you beat the odds," Amira swore. "You're going to live a long life, Daindreth Fanduillion."

"That sounds like a threat." Daindreth smiled faintly.

"It is." Amira leaned down, bringing their faces close together. "And I'll fight who I have to. Even the gods themselves."

Amira had stripped down to her underclothes—a shift and her corset. Daindreth was barefoot in nothing but his trousers.

"Careful, love. They might take that as a challenge." Daindreth plucked at the laces between her breasts.

Amira undid the topmost knot and Daindreth loosened the strings still more. She shrugged off her corset and tossed them back through the door of the balcony. "I will keep you safe and establish your rule. Whatever it takes."

"Do you think about what you want after?" Daindreth rested his hands on her sides, the thin shift all that separated him from her bare skin.

"After?"

"The rest of our lives, Amira. Ruling this empire." He brushed the hair back from her face. "Few rulers come to power as young as we have. If the gods are good, we might reign another forty years. Fifty. Perhaps more."

That had crossed Amira's mind a few times. When Daindreth had chosen her as his bride, she had expected to be dead within a year, definitely within two. When they had been on the run, she'd been focused on keeping them all alive. Now,

she was focused on solidifying his rule. There had not been much time for dreaming of the future.

She had daydreams here and there. Hopes. Wishes. But no plans. That seemed out of order. There was still too much work to be done to see that their reign lasted the next two weeks, never mind a lifetime.

“You,” Amira answered truthfully. “I want you. And I want my sister safe. Preferably happy. Thadred and the Istovari, too.” Amira’s brow furrowed. “I think I would even like to see Cromwell successful. That’s the same thing as happy to him, I think.”

“That’s a good start.” Daindreth reached under the hem of her shift, sliding his hand up her thigh. “I want you. Of course.”

Amira smiled at that. “Of course. And our gaggle of Fanduillion babies?”

Daindreth laughed at that. “Yes. Definitely.”

“With a firstborn every bit as charming and idealistic as his father?”

“I will welcome any child we make, but...” Daindreth’s expression softened as he drew her shift up over her head. “No, I’d like a daughter first.”

“A daughter?” Amira shucked off her shift. Her skin shivered in the crisp night air, then Daindreth’s hands were on her again.

His hand traced the outline of her bare breast. “A girl with your ferocity and fire-red hair.”

“She sounds like a menace.”

Daindreth grinned. “Yes.”

“She’ll terrorize the nobles.”

Daindreth laughed at that. He rolled Amira under him, pinning her on the blanket. “Anything she gets from you, I will cherish.”

“Mmm. Be sure to remember you said that when she’s beheading men in front of the court.”

Daindreth pinned Amira’s wrists over her head, his lips and tongue working down the side of her neck. “Of course.”

Amira tilted her head back to give him better access to her throat. She gasped as he nipped her skin.

“Promise me.” Daindreth’s tongue flickered further down, over her heart.

She squirmed under him, enjoying his ministrations, but wanting to take his trousers off. “Yes?”

“No trying to kill my mother. At least not until you speak to me.”

Amira groaned, half in frustration, half because his other hand had wandered to her thighs. “Daindreth.”

“Promise me.”

“I can’t promise that.” Amira’s back arched.

“Yes, you can.” Daindreth stroked her inner thigh, his touch drifting torturously close to the apex of her legs, but not quite touching.

“Daindreth, I can’t.”

“Yes, you can.” His voice was breathy and heavy in her ear. “Promise me.”

Amira spread her legs, pulling closer against him. “Please.”

“Promise.” Daindreth’s voice turned low, seductive.

“I want you,” Amira gasped. She could feel his smirk against her cheek.

Daindreth nipped her ear. “Promise me.”

Her husband might be immune to bed tricks and love play, but Amira was not. She broke. “I promise.”

“You won’t do anything to my mother without consulting me?”

Amira squirmed under him. “Yes. Yes, I—”

“That’s my girl.”

Amira let off a plaintive moan, writhing in his grip.

Daindreth inched up between her legs, delicately touching where she ached for him the most. “This is what you wanted?”

“Yes.” Amira moaned, her back arching more as he played her body like a master musician.

“Mmm. Good, darling. Moan for me.”

Amira did moan for him—loudly. She screamed as she climaxed, shaking and writhing in his arms. She laid there after, shivering and nestled against his bare chest. “Daindreth,” she whimpered. “Daindreth.”

“Yes, love.” He kissed her temple. “What is it?”

“I love you.” Amira’s mind couldn’t process much else in the moment. “I love you.”

“I love you, too.” He brushed her hair back, holding her against him.

“Arguing with you ends surprisingly well for me,” Amira choked a laugh.

Daindreth chuckled in response. “Yes.” He kissed her forehead again. “Will it end well for me, too?”

Amira shifted, reaching for his trousers. As much as she wanted him inside her, that would be unwise tonight. If she concentrated, she was able to sense the flaring *ka* in her womb, eager to welcome a child. But Amira and Daindreth were not ready to welcome a child. Not when Vesha and her demonic horde were on the loose.

“Lie down,” Amira whispered.

Daindreth complied, lying back on the blankets. He folded his arms behind his head, watching her as she rose on top of him.

He sighed as she took him into her mouth, voice husky. “That feels good.”

Amira was still learning, but she had gotten plenty of practice these past weeks. Using her hands and her mouth, she stroked, sucked, and licked him, enjoying the way his breathing turned heavy and strained.

“Lover...” Daindreth spoke the word like a thousand caresses. His fingers webbed through her hair, and he guided her head down, hand trembling as he came closer to release.

Daindreth moaned. His whole body went stiff, and he fell back against the blanket, gasping her name.

Amira swallowed and ran her hands along his thighs, licking him clean.

Daindreth laughed. “You’re amazing.”

Amira crawled up beside him, pillowing her head on his chest. “I love you.”

Daindreth stroked her bare back. “I love you, too.” He drew her up, pulling her into a long, slow kiss. He sighed, head resting against the blanket. “I never thought I’d have a wife who did that.”

Amira giggled. “I’m happy to bless you, my love.”

Daindreth laughed, wrapping his other arm around her. “Remember what you promised me.”

Amira rolled her eyes, though he couldn’t see it.

Daindreth would protect his mother. She didn’t understand why, but he would. Unless she had no other choice, he would never allow her to kill Vesha.

At the same time, that woman was a threat to everything they had and everything they sought to build.

Amira had no illusions that Vesha would go down with dignity. It would be a fight to the death, messy and bloody and savage. And if Amira got her way, Vesha would be the one dead at the end.

Chapter Four

Daindreth

Lying beside Amira, Daindreth was happy. Happy as he had never dared to hope he'd ever be.

When he agreed to marry Fonra, which seemed like a lifetime ago, he'd hoped for mutual respect, perhaps even fondness. With the fear of Caa Iss, the goal had been simply to produce at least one heir, but preferably two or three, before he eventually succumbed.

He would have been a distant father—he would have had to be to protect Fonra and any children they might have had. Not to say their children would have been neglected. They would have been cared for as befitted an imperial family. But it would have meant most likely never really knowing his children.

That had saddened Daindreth far more than he had wanted to admit. He'd worshipped his own father the way only a little boy could. Knowing he couldn't have that had weighed heavily on him, but Daindreth had been resigned to doing his duty and bearing the burden. For the sake of the empire and the continuation of his house.

Then Amira burst into his life. She hadn't been part of anyone's plan. He hadn't known what to make of her, but he had been desperate. When he realized she had the power to free him from Caa Iss, he had thrown everything into that chance. What did he have to lose?

The empire would doubtless be dealing with the consequences of that choice for years. Many people had been displeased or even insulted. Many of their daughters, nieces, and cousins had been passed over in favor of this bastardized princess. In some provinces, even the common folk were taking the matter personally—demanding what was wrong with their own duchess or viscountess or local heiress. The

Bolesses had gone so far in voicing their displeasure as to attempt assassinating Amira.

But Daindreth didn't regret it.

Now he could imagine a future where he got to be an emperor, where he was able to truly inherit the empire his father wanted to give him. He could be the one who cared for its people and brought peace to their lands.

Even more, he was free. His mind was his own. Sometimes, he would sit in silence, savoring the newfound quiet in his head. Even when Amira wasn't with him, he could enjoy peace.

Someday—and he hoped it would be soon—he and Amira would have their own heirs.

As best Daindreth knew, the empire had never been ruled by a sorcerer. But since magic passed along the mother's line, all Amira's children should have at least some ability.

How ironic that the empire Drystan had tried to purge of sorcerers would someday be ruled by one.

Daindreth watched Amira sleeping, wondering if she was truly asleep, or just savoring the moment as he was. He traced his fingers along her bare back.

Puckered scars snaked up from around her ribs. Daindreth had learned the map of her scars by heart. A new one was forming on the side of her neck, where the Boless assassins had stabbed her. The surgeons were hopeful it would heal, but it still looked red and angry even with the help of Sair's healing magic.

Amira rolled onto her elbows and pushed herself up. They had left the curtains open last night and the light just began to poke through the windows. "You're meeting with the ambassador of Ecran today?"

It took Daindreth a moment to remember, then he nodded. "Yes."

"Do you think the horse lords will recognize your rule?"

Daindreth shrugged. “They barely recognized my father’s rule, even after he conquered them.”

That was the problem with being the son of a conqueror. Once the conqueror was dead, men tended to remember that their own fathers and grandfathers had once been unconquered.

Daindreth had considered letting some of the vassal kingdoms go—Ecran to start. But he knew better.

An emperor who could not keep his empire united would be seen as weak. That would invite civil unrest, which would invite more fighting—more death and hunger.

The empire was full of men who had either watched Drystan’s rise to power or been raised on the tales of it. If Drystan had taken a respectable, but small realm and expanded it to encompass most of the known world, why couldn’t someone else?

But the world did not need another Conquest.

Even if Daindreth dissolved the empire today, the local lords, barons, and landowners would go to war as they sought to carve up the continent for themselves. It would not simply go back to the way things had been before. The wealthy and powerful would fight, and anyone who got between them would pay the price. Too many people had gotten a taste for empires, and if this one fell, they just might try building their own.

Nobles were like dogs—useful for defense and could be trained to protect, but they could also be dangerous if not kept on a leash.

“Perhaps they will see sense,” Amira said as she rolled onto her back and stretched.

Daindreth had to wonder if she displayed her body on purpose or if it was a happy coincidence. “Perhaps.”

Amira yawned. “You should remind them that they live mere leagues from the Avul lands. The empire’s garrisons are

all that protect them.”

“I think they might be getting ideas about manning those garrisons themselves.”

Amira scoffed. “Unlikely.”

“Have you ever been to Ecran, my dear?” Daindreth tried not to make the question sound surly.

“No,” Amira clipped. “But I know what happened when they tried to post watches against the Erymayan armies.”

“Oh?”

Amira rose out of the bed—naked. “Those assigned to guard duty got bored and rode down from the steppes into the hills, looking for the army.” She picked up her shift from where they had thrown it on the floor last night. “Drystan’s scouts spotted them and drew them into a trap. They were killed down to a man, three hundred warriors lost in a single day. Drystan conquered that clan not long after and the rest of the clans had been conquered within a year.”

Daindreth wasn’t so sure. People could change and groups of people tended to remember lessons learned the hard way. “How do you know so much about my father’s Ecran conquest?”

“Cromwell told me the story.”

“How did he know it?”

“He was there. He spent some time as a mercenary.”

Daindreth wasn’t surprised. “Of course, he was.”

“Anyway. The Avul will be more than happy to pillage the steppes first chance they get. The Ecran should remember that.”

Daindreth resisted the urge to sigh. Already, the strain of politics was settling over him. “I must dominate these people for their own good. That’s what you’re saying.”

Amira pulled on her shift and sat beside him on the bed.
“You’re emperor.”

“You say that like it’s a reason in itself.”

“It is.” Amira leaned over and kissed him. “The empire needs you.”

“You’ve always been so certain.” Daindreth shook his head.
“Even when you barely knew me.”

“The gods have gone through far too much trouble to keep you alive. I am convinced they have great plans for you.”
Amira rested a hand on his arm.

A door opened from somewhere in the apartment. Amira’s maids were coming to fetch her for the morning’s preparations.

“Greatness is your birthright.”

Daindreth chuckled. “You flatter me too much, my dear.”

“Are you calling me a liar?” Amira cocked her head to the side, playful with just a hint of a challenge.

“What if love has blinded you?”

Amira rolled her eyes. “Come, my dear. Let’s see if you can master Ecran without bloodshed.”

A knock came from the bedroom door.

“Your Majesties?” a soft voice called from the other side—one of Amira’s maids.

“One moment,” Amira shouted back. She turned to her husband. “You might want to put something on, love.” She picked his trousers off the floor and handed them to him. “Some things are for my eyes only.” She leaned over and kissed him again.

Daindreth grinned as he pulled his trousers on and then his shirt. He slept in her bed every night and their servants and retainers had learned the routine.

He preferred her room. There was something *victorious* about making love to her in the same spaces where he had once had to resist her. When Caa Iss had been in control, it had been a constant battle, a fight to keep her safe.

Daindreth had been terrified that if he gave in, he'd lose control in the passion. His desire for Amira had been something hot and fiery, a thing that made his blood boil and his body tremble.

He'd wondered if his desire for her would be slaked, if the aching hunger for her would ebb once they came together. It hadn't.

Daindreth watched her pull on her dressing gown, already thinking of taking it off again tonight.

"My Lord?" From the receiving area in the other room, Daindreth heard his valet calling. Brensel, was the man's name. He had known Taylan, Daindreth's late valet.

Taylan had been the closest thing to a father he'd had after the death of Drystan. Taylan had been a good enough friend to agree to help Daindreth end his own life—when they had thought that was his only option. Captain Darrigan had killed him for it.

Taylan was left to bleed out on the carpet while Daindreth was hauled off. Taylan had died alone, thinking he'd failed his young master.

Daindreth reminded himself that he would find out what had happened to Taylan's body and see he had a proper burial. If nothing else, he would see to it that the man was remembered. So many people had given their lives for him over the years—willingly or not.

Amira thought it a sign that the gods favored him. But Daindreth felt the guilt of his own survival like a debt. He would have to live a long time and be an exceptionally good emperor to repay everything his own life had cost.

Daindreth shared one final kiss with his empress, long and indecent enough to make the maids look away. "I will see you

this afternoon, my love.”

Brensel had Daindreth’s dressing coat by the door, waiting patiently for his lord. “Your Majesty.” He bowed.

Daindreth slid his arms into the coat as Sair swept in with several other ladies in waiting. They were all still in their dressing gowns and night caps. It would usually be improper for men to see them in this state, but it felt different with Sair. Daindreth had carried her through a swamp, and she had seen him half-naked while she tended his wounds. He’d never had an older sister, but he imagined Sair felt like one.

“Lady Sairydwen,” Daindreth nodded to her as Brensel tied his coat in place.

“Your Majesty.” Sair slid in past him, several books in her arms.

Daindreth thought she looked tired. Not surprising. Few of them were sleeping well these days.

The emperor stepped out into the hallway. His own rooms were several halls over—or what had been his rooms. He’d lived in them since boyhood, but since returning and claiming his title of emperor, he hadn’t been able to sleep in them.

Perhaps he would, someday. But those were the rooms where Taylan had been murdered. Those were the rooms where Daindreth had struggled with Caa Iss night after night, alone in the dark.

Daindreth was usually able to get dressed before he was accosted by clerks and ministers, but not today.

He spotted Dame Cormorant in her lawyer’s habit coming toward him with her flock of apprentices. A severe woman with eyes lined in kohl and hair pulled back, she had been on his official staff for years. She had rewritten the terms of his marriage contract, adjusting it so that he had been able to ask for Amira’s hand instead. But if she had any feelings one way or another on his ultimate choice of bride, she had given no sign.

“Your Majesty.” The lawyer bowed as was fitting when greeting an emperor.

“Mistress Cormorant.” Daindreth arched one eyebrow. “You’ve risen early.”

“I have pressing matters to discuss with you, my liege.”

“Walk with me.” Daindreth was still in his dressing robe and already the affairs of state had come to nip at his heels.

Dame Cormorant fell in beside him as if she had expected as much. “The first is a petition from one Viceroy Gevick. He requests lordship of a nearby fief since the previous marquess has died without an heir. As a viceroy of the crown, his requests come to you.”

“Are there no opposing claims?” That struck Daindreth as off. Usually, a score of heirs and potential heirs would come crawling to claim any inheritance that they could even tenuously claim.

“There were, my liege. But it seems the two nephews with the strongest claim were found dead. The next in line is an illegitimate half-brother who is accused of their murder.” Dame Cormorant flipped the pages. “There’s also an elderly aunt who is seeking the title as well.”

“An aunt?”

“The late marquess’ great-aunt. The viceroy argues that she is too old to inherit under the Vitality Law passed by Emperor Dreyvan.”

Daindreth shook his head. The Vitality Law had not been in actual practice since long before his father’s time. “I doubt this fief requires military service from its lord. If her claim is legitimate, the title should go to the great-aunt.”

“It is and I agree.” Dame Cormorant nodded curtly. “Next, there is...”

Daindreth worked to focus as the details of several cases were read to him. He made decisions quickly, as he had been taught to do after a lifetime training to rule this empire.

It frightened him sometimes—how quickly and easily he made decisions that could change fortunes, fates, and even the course of history. If he changed one man's life, one woman's life, and by extension all those around them...

He was crafting the fates of places he had never been, people he had never known, generations he would never see. Sometimes he wondered why the gods entrusted so much to one man.

As he stepped up to his chambers, Dame Cormorant either came to the end of her caseload or decided the rest would have to wait. She left him along with her ranks of clerks and apprentices.

The servants opened the doors and Daindreth slid in. He wondered if Amira was even now being mobbed by retainers as he was. Inside, Brensel set to work ordering about the ranks of footmen, lower valets, and household staff.

It was a busy thing, readying an emperor for a day's work. Especially one not yet a month on the throne.

Daindreth let them shuffle him to and fro. In many ways, he felt like a ship caught up in a current. To be emperor was to be constantly caught between being a storm and being swept along by one. As much control as he had over the lives of others, he often felt as if it cost him control over himself.

As he put on his clothes for the day and Brensel set to dressing him, Daindreth could hear yet more clerks and retainers filing into his rooms.

Chapter Five

Vesha

Vesha knew where she was going, at least a part of her did.

There was a pathway somewhere near here—or there had been. Ages ago, when gods had walked the earth, the portal had been just a few leagues inland. Now it was more. Many more.

The continent had shifted, broken. Pieces of it had worn away into the sea or been eroded by floods. Other pieces had been pushed up by the grinding of the earth's crust and centuries of silt and dead things.

Fascinating how the land worked. Not like the sky. The sky changed, but it took more than the gnawing of waves or the bite of the wind to do it. Stars were constant. They changed over the course of eons, not centuries, years, or days. They were safe. Permanent.

The stars. She missed the stars.

Vesha rubbed her forehead. She had only to look up to see the stars. They were fading with the encroaching dawn, but they were right there. She *knew* that and yet that thought came to her with the longing of ages. She felt the loss of the stars as keenly as the loss of her own husband.

She took a deep breath and straightened. Her headaches yesterday were minimal, and she hadn't needed wine.

Odette lay curled on a pallet inside their cart. The girl was exhausted after a long day of travel. She was a lady's maid, not a soldier.

Perhaps Vesha should have ordered her to take on a cythraul. There were still a handful of them without bodies. It would have at least eased the girl's physical pains.

Even as she thought it, Vesha quailed at the idea. She was afraid to be alone among these creatures. Even surrounded by

cythraul in their motley collection of bodies, even if they bowed to her and called her by her titles, she felt incredibly alone.

Vesha crouched near the fire because she hadn't been able to sleep. She caught herself looking to the sky again and again, that ache in her to see the heavens.

"Your Majesty." Araa Oon bowed to her, gaunt face neutral as always.

Vesha almost jumped at his words.

Most cythraul lumbered through the dark, some crept. Araa Oon seemed to glide, never making a sound until he wanted to.

"Yes, Hunter?"

"We are ready to begin the attack."

Vesha tensed. "What attack?" She had known something of this. Araa Oon had told her. She was sure of that and yet...

Caa Iss sniggered, sliding from the shadows. His insubstantial hulk wended around her like a great shark she had once seen circle her ship off the coast. "Forgetting things, Your Majesty?"

If Araa Oon was disappointed or annoyed at her forgetfulness, he gave no sign. He stood at attention. "There is a town ahead, my lady. We need more hosts and provisions, as you said."

Vesha didn't remember saying that. A cold sensation gripped her heart, but she couldn't show weakness. Cythraul would pounce on weakness like wildcats. "What is the name of the town?" she clipped, making her voice sound imperious.

"I don't know," Araa Oon answered honestly. "According to our scouts, it is seated atop a hill with a wooden palisade circling the outside. There are gates, but they are not guarded as best we can tell. We can see no additional defenses." He inhaled suddenly, almost like he had forgotten to breathe for a moment. "I would estimate three hundred or so souls inside.

Even if only a quarter of them relent, we should be able to add a worthwhile number to our ranks.”

Vesha shook her head. “Why are we attacking them?”

“Hosts and provisions, my lady.” Araa Oon repeated it without the slightest hint of impatience or concern.

“But why.” Vesha looked from Araa Oon to Caa Iss. “I am ruler of this land. I don’t need to invade it.”

“These lands have been claimed by Daindreth, my lady,” Araa Oon answered calmly. “I believe that even to you, they constitute the enemy.”

“No.” Vesha stood, hands fisting at her sides. “I made a bargain with your mother to save this empire, not raze it to the ground.”

“And we will save it,” Araa Oon agreed. His face remained impassive, unreadable. “But we must take it, first.”

“It is no different from what your husband did,” Caa Iss purred in her ear. “We must first unite the people to us. Then we will worry about saving them.”

Vesha whipped a glare to Caa Iss before spinning back to Araa Oon. “You will not attack unarmed villagers without provocation.”

Araa Oon blinked slowly, looking to be genuinely confused. “I do not understand, my lady. We need their resources if we are to advance your cause.”

“We give them the chance to surrender.” Vesha’s thoughts worked too slow, too sluggishly, but she forced her mouth to form the first words that came to mind. “We offer them peace terms. We do what Drystan did.” She glared at Caa Iss who only grinned back.

Caa Iss rested his chin in his hands. “And if they refuse?”

A sharp pang went through Vesha’s head. “Then...” She fought as her eyes began to water. “Then we do what we must, but...but not before!”

Caa Iss shrugged, looking to Araa Oon. “You heard the empress. Give them terms.”

“Now?” Vesha gasped.

“Well, yes,” Caa Iss mused. “Yes, now, I think.”

“But it’s the middle of the night,” Vesha protested.

“Your point?” Caa Iss looked to the sky overhead. “The sooner the archduke and his bitch of a wife find us, the more likely they can stop us. We do not have time to wait for the sun.” Caa Iss bared his teeth. “I have never liked him anyway.”

“Daindreth?”

“The sun. He’s an arrogant prick.” Caa Iss scratched at one of his horns. “No sense of humor, either.”

Vesha spun back to Araa Oon. “You will offer them terms,” she insisted. “You will give them the chance to surrender.”

Araa Oon cocked his head to the side. “The chance to surrender?”

“Yes!” Vesha’s voice cracked. Her heart pounded and she could feel her pulse in her ears, her chest, and shuddering along her spine. “You can’t just...these people have done nothing to me. To you.”

“They betrayed you,” Caa Iss rumbled. “They sided with Daindreth. After everything you have done for them. All the sacrifices you have made.” Caa Iss leaned down, seeming to coil around her. Massive arms planted on either side of Vesha, huge head leaning down over her. “Show them what the world will be like without you.”

Vesha shuddered. The throbbing in her temples grew worse and her god-eye burned. “You will do as I say,” she forced out. Vesha fixed Araa Oon in a hard glare, though he had barely even moved. “You will tell these people that every fourth person must become a host. No more. And we will take no more than a quarter of any food or provisions they have.”

Araa Oon cocked his head at that. “My lady, there are hundreds of us in bodies now. We are stronger and more resilient than our hosts by themselves, but we must eat in these forms, the same as you.”

Vesha touched her face, the skin around her right eye hot and swollen. “Do as I say!”

“If they refuse, my lady?” Araa Oon asked.

“Then...” Vesha shook her head. “Then I tried.” Even she heard the defeat in her own voice.

Araa Oon clipped a nod. “As you command. I will prepare.”

“We surround the village and wait until morning, do you understand?” Vesha snarled. “I’ll not have you dragging those poor people from their beds.”

Araa Oon’s shoulders rose and fell in what might have been a sigh. “I do not understand, but I will obey.” Araa Oon marched away, back into the trees.

Caa Iss sat across from Vesha. He cast no shadows and firelight cast no shadows on him. He was spectral, wraithlike. “Losing the stomach for what needs to be done?”

“I will not tolerate destruction without reason!” Vesha snapped. “This empire can’t be handed over to Moreyne if it’s in pieces!” Vesha was starting to realize that the cythraul responded best to anger.

From the back of the cart, Odette watched them with wide eyes. Vesha wondered how long the girl had been awake. No doubt she had been listening for some time.

“Well, I suppose we can make it destruction *with* reason here shortly.” Caa Iss glanced to the sky. “Dawn should be soon, I think.”

Vesha shook her head. Surely not. But when she looked to the east—yes, Caa Iss was right. A vague sense of confusion crossed her mind. Had she really been longing after the stars all night?

“There is no point in saving this empire if I must dash it to pieces. These people are innocent.”

“Innocent?” Caa Iss scoffed at that. “I find that unlikely.”

“They are!” Vesha insisted.

“All mankind are guilty of something.” Caa Iss made a dismissive gesture with his talons. “Lust. Covetousness. Lying.” Caa Iss cast her a sidelong glance. “Stealing. Murder.”

Vesha swallowed, turning away from him.

“You understand, do you not? I’m saying you stole your son’s throne and that—”

“I know what you’re saying!” Vesha snarled. Something deep and primal rumbled out of her throat, something that made the ground tremble just a little.

Several of the nearby cythraul shrank back. Odette let off a soft cry.

Even Caa Iss flinched. But it did not dissuade him. “You pretend at morality, my dear Vesha, but you are fooling yourself. You are damned for your actions. I hope you know this.”

Vesha, oddly, felt nothing at that.

“Upon your death, my mother will claim you as one of her cythraul.” Caa Iss ruffled his wings. “Have I mentioned this?”

Vesha refused to believe it. There had to be rest after this. There had to be an end. Whatever waited for her in the afterlife, she hoped it would be quiet or nothing at all. Just now, she could stomach the prospect of oblivion. Surely, it would be better than what she was living.

Except...

She wanted to see Drystan again. And when she did, she wanted to be able to tell him that she had kept together what he had won with the blood of his legions and most of his own life.

That had been Drystan's dream. An empire. Uniting the continent so strongly that peace and prosperity would reign for a thousand years.

So far, Vesha had only managed twenty or so. How long had she been empress? She struggled to remember. And Drystan had been gone for so long...

She looked back to the stars. Was he somewhere in that cosmos?

The priests said he was in the hall of Demred, his ancestor. But Vesha wasn't of the blood of Demred, only half Erymayan herself.

Did that mean she would go to one of the other gods? Or perhaps she truly was destined for Moreyne. Perhaps she truly was destined to never see Drystan again.

"Perhaps Mother will allow you to be a prince among us," Caa Iss sneered. "I wonder if she will call you one of her children."

"Shut up." Vesha bolted to her feet.

Caa Iss fell silent. He usually did when she lost her temper, but only then.

Vesha paced in a quick circle. Despite having stayed awake all last night, she didn't feel tired. She felt more alive than ever. Increasingly, she found herself tired during the day and then restless at night.

Vesha was taking on attributes of Moreyne. She had tried to ignore it for some time, but it could be ignored no longer.

At the same time, what was she supposed to do about it? She was loathe to confide anything to Caa Iss. No, she knew better than that. But who else was she supposed to ask?

Vesha focused on breathing. That was the important thing. She needed to keep a clear head. Especially if she had to confront the cythraul again.

And she would have to confront them about something. It was just a matter of time.

Cythraul were like restless hounds in a kennel. They always tried to find a hole in the fence or to dig around it. Except Araa Oon, but...

Vesha sat back down.

The cythraul emptied out of their makeshift camp, called by Araa Oon. She overheard several of them say that they were surrounding the town.

Vesha felt sick, but this was a compromise. She could order Araa Oon not to confront the town, but he was right. They needed clothes, food, and many of the cythraul still needed new bodies.

Hosts did become stronger, more durable, and less dependent on sleep and food after being possessed, but it did not make them indestructible. They still needed to rest after a time, and they still relied on food and water.

“My lady?” Odette crawled from the back of the wagon. “My lady, would you like me to prepare your breakfast?”

Vesha assumed that Odette meant warming up whatever dried meat and bread still remained. “I’m not hungry.” She kicked at the rocks near the edge of the fire. “Add another log.”

Odette bobbed a bow and scuttled to obey. She never once complained, but Vesha sensed the girl hated being surrounded by these monsters. Most of the cythraul leered at Odette when they thought Vesha wasn’t looking.

Caa Iss rested his chin in his palm, watching the sky lighten. “Would you like to supervise Araa Oon’s efforts, my lady?”

Vesha shot him a glare.

“Perhaps you would like to oversee them. Araa Oon will keep control of himself, but I can’t make promises for the others.”

“Why doesn’t Araa Oon lose control?” Vesha demanded. “You sound so confident.” Other cythraul tended to lose themselves when they took control of bodies. They would go mad eating, swyving, drinking, and indulging in the sensual pleasures they hadn’t known for eons.

“Araa Oon was made to be a guard,” he answered. “A collie to herd the sheep.” He glanced to where the cythraul in question was rounding up the imps in hogs’ bodies. “Or the pigs, I suppose.”

Vesha didn’t want to see what was going to happen when the cythraul surrounded the town, but she needed to. If she was going to make sure that these stupid ingrates didn’t burn everything to the ground... She stood. “Come with me,” she ordered Caa Iss.

The demon had never defied a direct order from her—none of them had. But there was a large gulf between the words of a command and the spirit of the same command.

She no longer wondered why Moreyne was the way she was. A millennium with cythraul was enough to drive anyone to insanity.

“Shall I come, too, my lady?” Odette asked. She had been making an effort to wash her face in a basin of water, though it generally had the effect of moving dirt around instead of washing it off.

“If you wish.” Vesha was already in her cloak—she had never undressed. She headed toward the woods, after the gaggle of lumbering cythraul.

Caa Iss trailed after her and Odette came running, hanging close on her heels. Odette never wanted to be left alone with the cythraul.

It must have been closer to dawn than Vesha realized because she could see her way through the brambles and fallen branches. Odette tripped and stumbled, but that was no worse than most the cythraul.

Vesha could hear them blundering around her, snapping branches and cursing. A few let off cries of dismay as their clothes were torn. Stupid creatures.

The ground sloped upward and they climbed up between the trees. The ground was soft, spongy. Vesha wasn't sure if it was a layer of moss, a recent rain, or both. Either way, she knew she was becoming even more filthy by the moment.

They cleared the trees and reached an open swath of land. Looking around her, Vesha guessed this was the farmland Araa Oon had described. There were places where the earth had been ploughed and planted and others where it was still packed and fallow.

Cythraul came out of the trees behind her, hundreds of black shapes with glowing red eyes. Several of the pigs stopped, wanting to root in the rows for corn seeds.

Araa Oon called to them, and they came trotting up beside him.

“My lady, forgive me, but why are we attacking this village?” Odette asked softly, her voice barely above a squeak.

“We need more hosts,” Vesha answered, impressed with the emptiness of her own voice. “And food. Many of the others have worn out their clothes, too.”

Many of the cythraul had worn through their shoes and resorted to marching barefoot. Cythraul could heal from almost anything, but especially these weaker demons needed to save their energy—their power—for more useful things.

“But these people haven't done anything, have they?” Odette's voice was barely a whisper. “Forgive me, but I...”

“Shut up, girl,” Caa Iss snarled. “You don't know anything.”

Odette let off a whimper. She had been brave thus far, but all bravery had limits. She went silent as they trudged up the hill toward the sleeping village.

At Araa Oon's direction, the cythraul circled around the village, blocking both the entrances in and out of the palisade. Numbering in the hundreds, they surrounded the village.

"My lady, you are empress. Can't you just command them to give us what we need and then we can be on our way?"

Vesha shook her head. These people wouldn't believe she was empress. In their position, she wouldn't.

Vesha, Odette, and Caa Iss stopped, hanging back as Araa Oon directed the cythraul. Several of the others had distinguished themselves as his lieutenants and they paced the ranks, keeping the others in line.

"How many people do you think are inside?" Vesha asked Caa Iss. "Three hundred? As Araa Oon estimates?"

Caa Iss made a noncommittal rumbling sound. "Hard to say."

The ranks of cythraul had almost enclosed the village when Vesha spotted movement from the top of the palisade. A head popped into view and then a pair of them farther down the wall.

Vesha's gut went hard as voices rose from inside the village. Bells clanged and people shouted.

This was a quiet town, fairly far inland. That palisade would have been built for robbers and thieves, not invading armies. Vesha doubted that these people had ever been threatened by anything more than a few bandits.

"They've spotted us," Caa Iss purred. "Good. I hate waiting."

Vesha raised her chin. She would give these people the chance to give over what was wanted. If they refused...

A headache throbbed through her skull.

The sun poked its nose over the horizon, the timid light of dawn.

Araa Oon stepped forward. To the villagers peering over their palisade, a lean, rangy woman stood surrounded by a motley group of vagabonds. “You are surrounded,” he called. Anyone, even the most ignorant fool, would have been able to tell that voice didn’t belong to a human. “You may surrender. Or we shall take what we want by force. Will you hear our terms?”

In response, the villagers disappeared behind the palisade.

For just a moment, Vesha hoped that they would be reasonable. That they would give over the food and clothes this ragtag mob needed.

She was wrong.

Chapter Six

Amira

Word came of the horde before Amira had the chance to send for Iasu.

She had planned to do it. That had been settled. But she had been distracted by meetings and news of another earthquake off the coast. Thankfully, the damage this time was minimal, and no lives had been lost, but the local people had evacuated for fear of another tidal wave like the one that had ravaged Yndra.

That meant the towns further inland were being swamped with refugees and that created new problems.

No one was sure what to do. Should they reassure the people that the land was safe, and it was alright to go home? Another earthquake might come soon and harder than the first.

But at the same time, the smaller towns couldn't support the influx of city dwellers.

Amira suspected most people would return home of their own volition soon. As panic subsided, many would probably decide to take the risk. Many had not evacuated to begin with.

But...it was the crown's problem either way.

Amira had been approving—and sometimes denying—requests for local aid when the message came.

A town in the central empire, not a hundred leagues away, had been attacked.

In Daindreth's war room, Amira read the report while her blood turned cold. The local baron had written to explain what had happened and to ask for aid.

Daindreth rested his hands on the table, staring at the map. Westfall spoke with several of his officers.

A town of three hundred people had been ravaged. The survivors told tales of a mob with red eyes who had encircled their village. When the town elders had refused to hand over a quarter of their people and massive amounts of meat, bread, and wine—which was understandable—the mob had attacked.

A few survivors had made it to the nearby castle some miles away and the baron had sent soldiers to investigate. When the baron's men had arrived, they had found it empty and torn apart. It had not been burned, but doors had been ripped off hinges, furniture smashed. Belongings lay scattered in the streets. There had seemed to be no order to how the village had been ransacked.

Coins and what few precious stones the people owned had been left. Clothes and food had been taken as well as blankets. The animals had all been slaughtered, except the pigs which were missing. Corpses of people and other animals had been found.

Amira read the description of bodies that had been mutilated beyond recognition, entire families slaughtered. Some bodies showed signs of cannibalization. Limbs had been sawed off and bones had been charred over what appeared to be cookfires.

Amira grew sick. One infant had been tossed whole into a stew and the baron's soldiers had found the skull in the discarded pot. They feared the baby had been boiled alive.

Several reports from survivors had been detailed in separate documents.

Amira's hand trembled as she reached for the firsthand accounts. Most of the villagers were illiterate, but they had given their reports to priests, who had taken down their words.

“Baron Eules is most thorough,” Amira murmured, voice shaking even as her hand did. She had known cythraul were malicious. She had seen that they were wicked—truly wicked. But she usually glossed it over in her mind. She didn't like to think about what that meant—what it truly meant.

Amira didn't want to read the details, but she needed to.

There were conflicting accounts and some claims that didn't make sense. That wasn't surprising, but a few details emerged consistent.

A horde had come to the town and overrun it. They had wanted food and clothes and a quarter of the people as slaves. When the townsfolk had refused, a bloodbath had begun.

The first account was from a young boy who had hidden in his family's thatch. The soldiers had found him hiding when they arrived. He reported his family being ripped from their beds as the village had been overrun. His older sister had stuffed him in the rafters when their door was broken down. He was the sole survivor of his family.

The second was a woman in her late teens who had run. She had witnessed little beyond the start of the carnage. The scribe taking down her story noted that she was five months pregnant. Her toddler had been strangled in front of her. It was unconfirmed if her husband was among the dead.

Several boys reported watching the sheep in the fields that night. They had been outside the village, in the surrounding hills, but their story was almost as harrowing.

The boys reported hearing screaming around dawn and had started toward their village. Then pigs came, pigs with red eyes. They had attacked the sheep, scattering them over the countryside.

The animals had attacked the boys, too, chasing them into the forest. One of their friends had been with them and taken down by the monsters. He had been mauled to death, but his death had frightened the boys enough that they ran all the way to the baron's castle. They had been the first survivors to reach the baron.

Amira read carefully over the descriptions, heart pounding.

"Fourteen people survived," Daindreth said, voice flat. "Out of a village of more than three hundred."

Amira gulped. Only fourteen?

“Read this.” He passed Amira another report.

In this one the scribe relayed the account of an elderly woman, the wife of the late village headman. She had survived by playing dead after the cythraul—that was surely what they were—had slammed her against the wall.

The headman’s wife described a woman with dark hair of middle years who had commanded the rabble. The stranger had made her demands of the village and when they had refused, she had told the others they could do as they wished.

Amira looked up at Daindreth. “Vesha?”

Daindreth swallowed. “Keep reading.”

Amira wanted to demand if she was allowed to kill the bitch now. But she continued to read.

The headman’s wife reported seeing several of the other villagers with red eyes taking part in the slaughter. Parents had turned on their children. Siblings on each other.

“How is this possible?” Amira gasped. “For cythraul to possess people requires rituals and *power*.” Last they’d known, that was something Vesha did not have.

Westfall bowed to Daindreth before speaking. “We are sending more soldiers to confirm the baron’s reports.” He glanced at the papers. “It seems that the horde has moved on. No confirmation yet on where they are.”

“Do you know Baron Eules, Westfall?” Daindreth didn’t look up from his maps.

“I can’t say I do, Your Majesty,” Westfall answered.

Daindreth nodded once. “He’s a good baron. Used to be one of my father’s officers.” The emperor exhaled a tight breath. “He is not prone to exaggeration.”

Amira stepped up beside Daindreth, resting a hand on his shoulder. “I will find her and—”

“We don’t know if that would stop the raids,” Daindreth interrupted. “We don’t know anything.”

“Do you think these were cythraul?”

Daindreth still wouldn’t look up. “Yes.”

Amira raised her chin. “We can kill them. Send them back to the Dread Marches.”

“You wouldn’t kill me. Even when Caa Iss was in control.”

“You weren’t boiling babies alive,” Amira shot back. “You weren’t raping and mutilating entire villages.” Amira slammed the papers down on the table.

Daindreth didn’t match her anger. He just stared at the map.

“I’m sorry,” Amira said quickly. “I know that...” She breathed in slowly.

“I can have a battalion to Eules within two days,” Westfall said. Ever the soldier, he immediately went to what he could control. “I’ll send my best lieutenant.”

Daindreth still didn’t respond.

“We know where she is now,” Amira said, trying to make her voice soft. “My love...” She swallowed. Comfort was not her strong suit. “Husband.” She leaned closer to him.

“I thought we had protected this land,” he said, voice so low only she could hear. “I thought I had spared the people this.”

“Your Majesty.” Cromwell’s steady voice came from Amira’s back. She had sensed his *ka* enter the room but hadn’t realized it was him. “If I may be so bold, I expect we shall need more than a battalion.”

If cythraul were possessing people at will...there might be no stopping them.

At Cromwell’s side, Cyne stood quietly. The former queen looked grim but remained silent for now.

“We must confront her.” It was Daindreth who spoke. There was no qualifying statement to his words, no hesitation. “I will not allow this.”

Amira sensed a line had been crossed. A die had been cast. Vesha had played her hand. They might not yet know its full implications yet, but the evidence was clear.

Daindreth looked up, meeting Amira’s gaze first. In his face was hard determination, that same look he’d had on his face the night he’d decided to sacrifice himself. When he had ordered her and Thadred to leave him to his fate.

“I consider this a declaration of war.” Daindreth straightened, looking to those around the room. “If the former empress will attack my people, if she will bring these horrors into my land, then I have no choice.” He turned about the room.

Not a single person voiced disagreement. This was what they had all been saying in a hundred different ways.

Thadred came through the doors, Sair at his side. The two of them spent a lot of time together these days. “This better be good. Lady Jasyra was almost about to agree to raising taxes on silk imports.”

Amira shook her head.

Thadred’s playfulness evaporated.

“Vesha attacked a town.” Daindreth gestured to the papers of Baron Eules’s report strewn across the table. “Left but a handful of survivors.”

“With what army?”

“Cythraul,” Amira said. She stayed at Daindreth’s side, one hand on his arm.

Thadred looked to Sair before he reached for the first of the reports.

“We must retaliate,” Cyne said coolly. She had slipped back into the role of noblewoman and politician like a duck slipping

into a familiar pond.

Daindreth looked to his mother-in-law. “Your sorceresses?”

“Already sent for.” Cyne nodded.

“Westfall, we’re gathering an army. See how many men you can rally and report back.”

“How soon, Your Majesty?”

“We’re leaving tomorrow,” Daindreth said. “Each moment we delay is another moment that horde is free in my lands.”

“We may need more time,” Westfall replied. “The men may not be so easily gathered.

“Do what you must,” Daindreth said simply.

“Is that wise?” Cromwell had lingered at the edges of the room. “Until we learn how Vesha has brought about these cythraul possessions, might we want to wait before we give her access to legions of able-bodied soldiers?”

Daindreth looked to Cyne, then to Thadred and Sair. “What say you?”

Those three knew more about summoning cythraul than any of them. Cyne had been part of Caa Iss’ first summoning and Sair and Thadred had been learning all they could from Brother Kaphen, the monk who had inadvertently taught Vesha to become a witch.

“As best I know,” Cyne began hesitantly, “there must be a bargain in place with the host.”

“So why were you able to curse the Fanduillions?” Amira clipped, her temper short.

“Drystan...opened a gateway.” Cyne glanced to Daindreth as she spoke, but he watched her with no visible reaction. “He had killed hundreds of our people. It gave us grounds to curse him in the eyes of the gods.”

“How do you know?” Amira pressed. “Did they tell you?”

“All I know is that it shouldn’t have worked,” Cyne answered. “According to everything we have since learned from Brother Kaphen, it should have failed, but it didn’t.”

Amira massaged her temple with one hand. She wanted to act. She wanted to hunt down Vesha and finish that woman off. It might not solve their problem of rabid cythraul roving the countryside, but it could hardly hurt, could it?

“Cromwell,” Daindreth looked to the lawyer. “I need suggestions for who will run the empire while I am gone. Present me with a list tonight, please.”

Cromwell might have been surprised that he was being singled out for the task. He might not. Either way, he bowed, looking as if it was the most rational thing in the world. The man often seemed made of stone.

“You’re going out to meet her yourself, Majesty?” Westfall’s tone was measured, careful.

“My father rode to war. His father, too.”

“Forgive me, Your Majesty, but both of them met their deaths because of it. Your uncles, too.”

Daindreth’s great-uncle had been emperor before his father. Unfortunately, Emperor Dreyvan outlived all his own sons and his brother, too. The crown had skipped to Drystan, son of the emperor’s brother.

Daindreth nodded, agreeing solemnly. “Either way, I must see to this myself.”

“It will be dangerous, my liege.”

Amira almost laughed at that. Daindreth didn’t. If there was anyone who understood the dangers of cythraul, the dangers of a desperate Vesha, it was her husband.

“I know, Westfall.” Daindreth’s tone turned hard. “But I will not cower behind my walls while my mother sacks innocent villages.” His fist clenched and unclenched.

Amira felt his arm tense. He was angry. Outraged. It was like the rage he had shown after the attempt on her life, but different. This rage was deep, simmering.

This was the kind of rage that led men to launch battleships and raise armies. It was not the sort that called for one quick beheading and then an end to it.

This was rage that demanded satisfaction.

It fit that Daindreth's patron was the god of retribution. He had not been able to protect his people, but he would see them avenged.

Amira realized then that Daindreth could have forgiven his mother for what she'd done to him. He'd probably forgiven her for it a long time ago.

But slaughtering innocent people? No, there would be a reckoning for that.

"Has there been any additional news of the horde?" Cyne looked to Westfall.

"None yet," he replied. "But it's possible they have attacked others and we do not yet know."

"I want to know," Daindreth said. "I want the local reeves to report any mutilations or unusual crimes in the countryside."

Westfall bowed. "Of course, Your Majesty. Shall I send for Commander Harbin?"

"Yes." Daindreth had gone calm. Cold. "He should know, if nothing else."

Harbin was the army commander of Erymaya. It had been a semi-ceremonial position these past few years, but Harbin was another veteran of Drystan's campaigns. His counsel would be valuable.

"Amira." Daindreth clasped both of her hands in his. "I will need sorceresses to accompany us."

Amira nodded, squeezing his hands back. "I'm coming with you."

"Amira..." Daindreth sounded like he would argue. "You are my wife. My co-ruler."

Amira heard what was unsaid. If he died, she would have the strongest claim as his heir. It might be the means to prevent a civil war in that case, but Amira had no interest in protecting the empire if he wasn't in it.

She pulled him in close. It was bad form to argue with her husband in front of their advisors, so she kept her voice down. "Where you go, I will go." She swallowed, wanting him to understand. "I would want you to stay if our places were reversed, but..." She shook her head. "We have only ever defeated a cythraul together. Neither of us has ever done it alone."

Daindreth exhaled. "You'd follow me anyway, even if I forbade it."

"Your Grace, if I may." Cromwell cleared his throat. "I agree with the emperor that you should stay behind."

Westfall nodded in hasty agreement. "We do not know what we face."

Amira forced herself to remain composed. Her blood was hot and she burned with the desire to punish Vesha, but she couldn't take it out on these men who meant well. "I am a Kadra'han," Amira reminded them. "My place is with my liege."

"It's entirely self-interest," Cromwell said flatly. "If you die, I will likely follow. Your lady mother and her sorceresses as well."

He was probably right. The Istovari's acceptance in the empire was thanks to her. But she was going with Daindreth. "Then I suggest you light extra candles and pray for me, Lord Cromwell."

She knew it was risky. Without her or Daindreth in the palace, that might give space for plots to rise against them. So far, they knew of no rival claimants to the throne, but if someone decided their own tenuous claim might be better than an absent emperor...

But they weren't going far. The Eules barony was mere days away. And Amira had a feeling that no matter how this turned out, she and Daindreth would either return victorious, or not at all.

Sair looked from Thadred to Amira, then to Cyne. She nodded once, raising her chin, hands clasped before her.

Cyne looked to her daughter and inclined her head. "We are with you, Your Grace."

They had to be. The sorceresses had placed all their hopes in Amira, their former sacrifice. If they could ensure an Istovari empress on the throne of Erymaya, that could change the fortunes of their entire clan. If Amira's son or daughter inherited after Daindreth, that would mean an Istovari on the throne itself. Anything was possible then.

Amira nodded to both women. To Daindreth, she said, "I will confer with my sorceresses." She squeezed her husband's hands one last time. "I shall leave my sister to manage my affairs in my absence."

Fonra would be good at it, too. She would be an excellent empress, even if a temporary one. She had been raised for this, after all.

"Go." Daindreth kissed her forehead. "I will speak with you tonight."

"Shall I go with them, Your Majesty?" Thadred asked, setting down one of the reports he'd been reading. "Sair—Lady Sairydwen and I have been leading the study of the cythraul."

"Stay," Daindreth said. "We will need your advice while we plan for the army."

Thadred cast a rueful look to Sair.

She touched his hand in a way that was a bit too familiar. “You know most of what I have to share.”

Amira left with the sorceresses in tow as Commander Harbin entered—a white-haired man in a starched uniform. He was tall, imposing, and with a face like chiseled granite. Everything an army commander was expected to be.

She expected more resistance to the idea of her and Daindreth riding to war. It was not unheard of for noble wives to accompany their husbands into the field, but these were unstable times.

They had no heirs, and the empire was in crisis as it was. A thousand calamities and disasters had befallen the empire in the past months. Now they were being invaded by monsters and the emperor was riding to battle mere weeks after his coronation.

But Daindreth would not be the first ruler to start his reign with a war.

Chapter Seven

Thadred

Thadred was relieved. That was probably the wrong emotion, but he was glad that Vesha had finally shown herself. It was horrible what she had done, and the bitch would be made to pay for it. But knowing where she was came as a relief.

Even if this meant that they now had a horde of cythraul somewhere in the countryside. No one was sure where the cythraul might be and no one was entirely sure if Vesha was still with them.

As reports from the local reeves had been re-examined, it turned out that strange things had been happening these past weeks. A few travelers here and there had disappeared, but the reeves had assumed it was due to bandits.

One family of five children had somehow survived the slaughter of a small village—less than a hundred people. According to them, their parents had been by murdered monsters on a nearby farm.

The children's grandparents and father had been found brutally murdered along with most their livestock. The children's mother was missing and so were the family's pigs.

A collection of boats—matching those reported missing from Iandua—had been found abandoned on the nearby beach. No one understood why and no explanation had been left behind.

Why did the cythraul spare the children at the farmstead? Thadred had been trying to figure that part out. It seemed that the cythraul hadn't spared anyone in Iandua, but then again, perhaps they had. Perhaps those who had fled into the countryside had been part of those granted survival.

“Mama says I can't come with you.” Rhis sat atop Lleuad, holding onto the stallion's mane.

Thadred had told Rhis it was to help Lleuad warm up before his saddle went on, but really, it was to keep Rhis out from underfoot. The kelpie stood quietly, though his ears twitched, and he watched Thadred closely.

“She’s right.” Thadred picked up Lleuad’s nearest hoof, checking the stallion over. A horse was as much a part of a knight as his sword or lance and Thadred had been taught to care for his.

“I am to stay with Princess Fonra.” Rhis pouted, voice showing just what he thought of that.

“Don’t worry, she’s quite fierce. I am sure she will protect you.” Thadred moved onto the next hoof, checking for any thorns, rocks, or minor wounds that might be cause for concern.

“I want to come with you,” Rhis insisted. “I want to be your squire.”

Thadred exhaled, straightening to look up at Rhis. “I don’t think your mother would approve.”

“Mama likes you,” Rhis pressed. “She talks about you all the time.”

“Oh?” Thadred tried not to sound too interested. “She does?”

Rhis nodded, adjusting his grip on Lleuad’s mane.

“Well, you’ll have to be a little older to be a squire.”

“Why do I have to be older?”

“You need to be big enough to pick up a saddle, for one thing.” Thadred patted Lleuad’s shoulder.

The kelpie chuffed and nosed at Thadred’s side. Thadred still wasn’t sure if that was affection or a reminder that the kelpie could bite him.

Rhis looked down, little shoulders rounded.

Throughout the stables, horses were being prepared and led out by soldiers. There were dozens of beasts being tacked and bridled by knights and their squires.

Thadred should have had a squire tend his horse, but Lleuad didn't get along with many people. One of the poor stableboys had nearly had his shoulder chomped last week and Thadred didn't want to put them through that.

Thadred had noticed the kelpie disliked people who weren't Istovari. Sair and Rhis he almost seemed to like, and the kelpie tolerated Amira, Tapios, and the rangers, but not Daindreth. He'd also bared his teeth at Fonra the one time she had come within reach.

"You and Mama are going to fight the monsters?" Rhis asked.

"Yes." Thadred moved on to the next hoof.

"Mama goes away often." Rhis' voice was sad.

"But she always comes back, doesn't she?" Thadred tried to sound as confident as he could.

"Yes." Rhis twisted around to see as Thadred worked on Lleuad's back hooves.

"Careful or you'll fall off," Thadred cautioned. "Don't twist so far."

"You won't let Mama be hurt again, will you?" Rhis blurted the words out in a tumble, like he was scared they would get stuck.

Thadred certainly didn't plan to let Sair get hurt, but false confidence was one thing. Outright lying to the boy, that was harder. "I don't know what will happen, Rhis." He tried to sound calm, confident. "But I will do what I can, alright?" He didn't want to see Sair hurt any more than Rhis did. "Now, are you ready to help me tack up Lleuad?"

Rhis nodded, holding out his arms to Thadred.

“No—here. Let’s practice dismounting a horse. Swing your other leg over.” Thadred caught Rhis by the waist. “But careful not to kick him. Good. Now just slide off.”

Rhis touched to the ground and patted Lleuad. “Good lad.”

The little stallion rolled a martyred look in Thadred’s direction. They would be leaving for the field again soon. Lleuad would only have to put up with Rhis for another hour or so.

“Hand me that brush, there. We don’t want dirt under the saddle.”

Rhis obeyed, handing Thadred brushes and *helping*. Thadred was learning that a child *helping* made the task twice as difficult. He could have finished in half the time if he’d sent Rhis away, but he didn’t.

“Alright, now watch your toes. Don’t stand that close to his hooves.” Thadred pulled Rhis back. “Don’t put your face that close to his knees, either.”

“Rhis, are you causing trouble?” Sair filled the doorway of the stall. She was in her riding habit and traveling cloak, her hair gathered in a bun at the nape of her neck.

Excitement shivered through Thadred at the sight of her before he stuffed the emotion down. “Have you met your son?” Thadred muttered, ruffling Rhis’ hair. “Nothing but trouble.”

Rhis giggled, swatting at Thadred. “I’m helping with Lleuad.”

“I can see that.” Sair looked past him to Thadred. “Tapios said you brought him down here.”

“I promised him he could say goodbye to the kelpie.” Thadred shrugged.

A part of him was curious what Lleuad would do when faced with a cythraul. Kelpies were creatures of Eponine and cythraul were the children of her opposite, Moreyne. What would happen when Lleuad was faced with them?

“We’re almost ready to leave.” Sair watched her son. “Princess Fonra is waiting for you.”

Rhis looked back to Thadred. “When will you be back?”

“Soon, I promise.” Thadred braced one hand against the wall so he could ease into a crouch before the boy. “And when we get back, I’ll teach you to ride.”

Rhis’ eyes widened. “Really? With a saddle and everything?”

“We’ll start without one, but yes.”

“Can I have armor? And a lance? And a warhorse and—”

“Let’s start with riding,” Thadred interrupted. “Don’t give Princess Fonra too much trouble, alright?”

“I like Princess Fonra,” Rhis said. “She has marzelman.”

Thadred frowned. “What?”

“Marzipan,” Sair explained with a faint smile.

“Ah. Yes, she does.” Thadred clapped the boy on the shoulder. “I’ll see you soon, alright? Be good.”

“I will.” Rhis seized him in a hug before Thadred could escape. He squeezed like a small monster, nearly knocking Thadred over.

“Come, Rhis.” Sair beckoned gently. “Let Thadred finish saddling Lleuad.”

Rhis trotted after his mother, taking her hand with a final wave back to Lleuad. That child would keep Fonra busy, that was for sure.

Thadred watched Sair and the boy leave, feeling...strange. He might be starting to like that little blighter.

He went back to his kelpie. Lleuad seemed relieved to no longer have small hands grasping at him.

Thadred finished tacking Lleuad and slipped the hackamore over his head. He’d decided on one with a generous noseband. It wouldn’t restrict Lleuad’s jaws if the stallion needed to bite.

He led Lleuad out of the stall and into the stable aisle. When they recognized the kelpie, the stable boys gave them both a wide berth.

Thadred might need to find better accommodations for his horse when they returned. Perhaps the game park, except there was no way to keep Lleuad from leaving it.

In the courtyard, Thadred found his cluster of servants and squires. They had been part of his staff before, but none of them could get near Lleuad. They greeted him respectfully, waiting as the rest of the imperial party readied themselves.

“Westfall says we will leave within the hour.” Tapios reined in his light courser a few paces outside Lleuad’s reach. “The soldiers are meeting us outside the palace.”

That had been about what Thadred had expected. “Are the rest of your brothers and sisters joining us?”

“Half,” Tapios answered. “The rest are staying to guard the queen.” By *queen*, Tapios meant Cyne.

Amira’s mother was being tasked with helping to hold Mynadra along with Fonra and Cromwell. She was also continuing research with Brother Kaphen.

Thadred had tried to argue that Sair should stay behind as well, but she insisted on being close to the empress. Amira was the Istovari’s single greatest hope for the future and all that.

Tapios twisted in his saddle, glancing around at the Istovari rangers and imperial retainers mingling around them. “These are strange times.”

“Tell me about it.”

“Do you think we can kill them?” Tapios asked, not quite making eye contact as he did.

Thadred was aware of several squires and attendants watching as he replied. “Yes.” He had many doubts, but not about that. “We’ve killed them before.” That much had been proven.

He wasn't sure how much had spread among the soldiers, but it seemed that stories of monsters with red eyes and insatiable bloodlust were spreading.

Thadred was aware of her as soon as she came back into view. Sair emerged into the courtyard and found her way to the palfrey that had been prepared for her. Her expression was grim, hard.

Thadred thought he saw her scrub away a tear as she mounted, but it might have been nothing.

Tapios followed his line of sight. He must have seen Thadred watching his sister. He must know that Thadred and Sair had been spending hours together each day. Their work demanded it, but any other man would have been instantly suspicious. Protective brothers had confronted Thadred over less.

But Tapios said nothing. Thadred almost wished he would. It would be a relief to at least know if Tapios wanted him to stay away from Sair or not.

“Why do you think the children were spared at that farmstead, but nowhere else?” So Tapios had been wondering the same thing.

“I don't know.” Thadred glanced at the ramparts.

“To send a message?”

“Maybe.” Thadred had considered that himself. “So much seems planned, but so much doesn't.”

“How do you mean?”

Thadred chewed his lip. “Why did Vesha land on some random coast?” He had been trying to figure that out ever since the hastily assembled fleet had been found not far from the first ravaged farmstead. “If she wanted towns or villages, why not go to one?”

Tapios shrugged. “Perhaps there was something there?”

Thadred had considered that, too. “It’s a possibility. But the children from the first farmstead recounted a monster making a deal with their mother.” The children had been scant on details, but they said they had been allowed to go because one of the monsters struck a deal with their mother.

It seemed that the cythraul still needed to strike deals to take hosts, but it didn’t explain the wholesale slaughter in the later town. Maybe Vesha had run out of cythraul to take bodies? That seemed a dangerous assumption to make. They needed to prepare in case she was keeping more of the creatures in reserve.

She might be able to swell her army into the thousands, but cythraul were sadistic as well as hedonistic. They would need a brutal amount of discipline to become anything other than a mob.

That was what seemed to be roving the countryside—a mob.

“Do you think Vesha herself might be possessed?”

“I’ve wondered that, too.” Thadred rested his hands on the pommel of his saddle. “We’ll know when we find her, I suppose.”

Sair steered her horse through the maze of other horses, pack mules, knights, servants, and soldiers in the courtyard. A few of the Istovari rangers surrounded her, bows unstrung and carried on their backs. They were to protect Sair, but not from anyone present.

“Are you ready?” Sair asked her brother and the knight.

They both nodded.

Tapios looked between Thadred and Sair, but only briefly. “How is Rhis?”

“Fine. Princess Fonra promised to give him a puppy if he behaves.”

Thadred shrugged. “Well, the good news is he probably won’t behave.”

Sair laughed weakly.

There was a heaviness over their group. Thadred had ridden to war before. He'd been on assignments to put down querulous nobles and put outlying provinces back in their place, but never like this.

Word had spread of what had happened to the town—Thurston, it had been called.

Most of the men didn't know the details. They would know Empress Vesha dabbled in witchcraft—Amira had been working to make sure as many people as possible knew it. She'd spent an entire week dismantling the Witch's Wheel in the garden. But they probably didn't know how possession worked or that a host usually had to agree to be possessed.

Yet stories spread. Stories of red eyes and ravenous monsters who tore men limb from limb.

Looking around the courtyard, Thadred could see fear in the quiet, studious way the men worked. He could hear it in the silence, the lack of men's laughter.

It might be inconvenient for the purpose of keeping them safe, but Dain and Amira coming with them was the best course of action. Men were different when their leaders were with them. More courageous. And they would need all the courage they could get.

Dain appeared, hard to see at first. He was in a soldier's hauberk with a helmet under one arm. Amira followed after him and Thadred nearly rolled his eyes.

The woman appeared in her hunting habit, the one the Istovari had made for her. She made no secret of her weapons, displaying them in plain sight. She moved close to Daindreth, more a bodyguard than a wife today.

"I remember when we were passing her off as a sweet little northern princess," Thadred muttered. "Now look at her."

"We don't need the empress right now," Sair said quietly. "We need the sorceress. The assassin."

Thadred couldn't argue with that.

They headed out of the main gates and into the city. Trumpets sounded and heralds called for the people outside to make way.

Dain's coronation had been mere weeks ago and now he rode to war with the empire in the hands of ministers, and no heir.

The last emperor, Drystan, had done the same thing. He had expanded the empire to its largest size ever, but he'd also died young and possessed by a cythraul.

Thadred fell in with Sair on one side with her Istovari guards and the soldiers assigned to him encircling them. Westfall had been able to muster a few hundred men and another two thousand would be marching to join them from the surrounding garrisons—they hoped.

No one was really sure where they were going just yet.

As they rode out the gates, Sair stared over her shoulder, looking back to the palace.

"He'll be fine," Thadred assured her. Rhis was just a boy. He would be forgotten in the bustle of the palace. He wouldn't be a target like Amira or even Fonra. "Fonra and Cyne will protect him."

Sair nodded and faced the front of her horse again.

"We'll be back before you know it," Thadred promised.

Sair smiled ruefully at him. They both knew he was probably lying.

Chapter Eight

Amira

Amira kept thinking how much faster she could have covered ground on her own. Most of the men were on horses, but even at a brisk pace, they could only go as fast as the slowest pack mule.

Looking at the map, Amira was sure she could have made it to Thurston herself by midmorning tomorrow. She would have ridden through most of the night, of course, and only stopped for a few hours' sleep.

Their army camped an hour before sunset. They had traveled just over twenty miles. Amira chafed at that. She tended her own horse, her muscles tight and head filled with thoughts of Vesha.

Daindreth listened to reports from his men. He'd never ridden to war before, and she could see it. There was a slight discomfort and awkwardness to him that he never had when he was dealing with clerks and bureaucrats.

Amira crouched in the shadows of his pavilion, waiting. There was little for her to do besides eavesdrop. She stayed close to Daindreth, listening to his men as they described mules that had started limping already and a few men who had sustained minor injuries while setting up tents. When there were this many men and animals, mishaps occurred.

Sair sat beside Amira, shawl around her shoulders and mug of hot wine in her hands. The sorceress wove light enchantments through the air to stave off the cold. Amira watched her work with half-interest. The spells might be useful when the nights grew colder.

They traveled as light as they could. It had scandalized Fonra when she had seen how Amira and Daindreth would be traveling, but Amira resolved to worry about appearances and

propriety another day. They were at war. Until they banished the cythraul and dealt with Vesha, nothing else mattered.

“If we kill Vesha,” Amira began carefully, keeping her voice down, “do you think that will banish the cythraul she’s summoned?”

“No.” Sair answered softly, but confidently.

“You didn’t even think about it.” Amira cast the other sorceress a look.

“I expect the agreement they made with Vesha was for their release. I doubt her death would have any effect.”

Amira shook her head. “I don’t understand that woman.”

“Understand how?”

“If she’s willing to murder entire villages to get her crown back, why didn’t she come straight to Mynadra? Does she just need bodies? Why couldn’t she find enough in Iandua? Why leave so many survivors there?”

“I don’t know,” Sair agreed softly. “Are we sure she wants the crown?”

“What else could she want?”

Sair shrugged and adjusted her shawl. “I have been thinking, is all. For so long, we have assumed that the crown is what Vesha was after. We’re also assuming she’s headed toward Mynadra.”

Amira considered that, her brow furrowing. “Do we have reason to think she wants something else?”

“She was already going to give up the crown,” Sair said. “Remember? You told me she’d planned to step down once Daindreth produced an heir and Caa Iss was in control.”

Amira tried not to shudder at the memory. “Yes. That’s what she said.”

“So, if she was already planning to step down, what could still be important?”

To Amira's mind, Vesha had nothing left. Her closest friends were dead. Her only child turned against her. Vesha's sister and sister's family were alive, but it sounded like they had been victimized by Vesha, not protected. "I don't know," she admitted.

"Me neither." Sair sighed. "There might be something we're missing. It doesn't change that Vesha needs to be put down."

Amira chewed her lip. "No, it doesn't."

Sair finished her cup of wine and rose. "I am going to check the camp for signs of trouble. Come with me?"

Amira caught what the other woman meant. "I'll come with you."

Sorceresses could sense a cythraul. The creatures' tainted *ka* gave them away.

The two women slipped into the camp. A part of Amira hesitated at leaving Daindreth alone, but he was surrounded by soldiers and as safe as he could be.

Amira checked her weapons one last time. It was unlikely they would have trouble, but she wanted to be safe. Thadred would never let her forget it if they were attacked by some drunk guardsmen while taking an evening stroll.

Tapios and a few of the other rangers saw them move and followed them. They trailed Sair and Amira at a respectful distance, their *ka* like warm beacons at their backs.

Amira had never thought she would miss the Haven. It had seemed a stopping point at the time. A means to an end.

Yet a part of her missed the few weeks they had spent there after returning from Kelamora. Those had been the most peaceful and restful weeks of her life, even with her impending wedding.

It occurred to her that she might never see the Haven again. She might never see Hylendale again.

The duties of an empress would take her far and wide. What was to say that they would take her back to her homeland soon, if ever?

Sair hooked her arm through Amira's, like sisters. In some ways, Sair did feel like an older sister, if a long-estranged one.

"Have you considered a husband for Princess Fonra?" Sair asked.

"What?"

"Since you took her intended, it seems fitting that you would find her another. You are her highest ranking relative." Sair cast Amira a sidelong glance.

Amira swallowed. "I suppose I am." It *should* be her place to arrange her sister's marriage, come to think of it.

"Could she be interested in an Istovari match?" Sair glanced over her shoulder. "My brother is unwed and—"

Tapios let off a strangled gasp that was too high-pitched to be feigned. Both women laughed.

Sair patted Amira's arm at the shared joke. "No, not my brother, I think. It's a shame." Sair sighed. "Even if she did wed one of us, none of her heirs would be Istovari."

"Unless it was a man who could pass the gift onto his children." In some ways, it was strange to discuss Fonra's future. For so long, Amira had been the one powerless. She had been a slave to her father's will and now she found herself with her sister's life in her hands. "We could marry her to Thadred, I suppose," Amira mused. "He's related to the emperor by blood, so the Bolesses should be pleased. He has land and titles now, but not so many as to compete with Fonra's." Amira laughed at the idea. "But he would hate having to move to Hylendale."

Sair remained silent for the next few steps.

"Sair?"

"Forgive me." Sair cleared her throat. "I...I'm sorry."

Amira didn't know how to break the sudden awkwardness, so she changed the subject. "Captain Westfall says we should be at Thurston within two days."

"Good," Sair said quietly. "The sooner we can find a fresh trail, the better."

They had reached the outskirts of the camp. Soldiers stood posted around the perimeter, guards for the night.

Amira knew all too well how easy it could be to slip past imperial guards. Just a single dreadsight spell was all it took. Fortunately, there were no sorceresses she knew of who were their enemies.

Men spoke quietly around campfires and a few stragglers pitched their tents. There was no drinking and reveling as Amira had seen in other military camps. These men were solemn. Guarded. Perhaps they had some idea of just what they would face.

Amira wondered how much of the truth had reached them. Many were probably trying to reconcile the benevolent empress with the butchery described in Thurston.

They might not believe it. But they were hardly ready for the truth.

These were imperial soldiers, but they were too young to have fought in Drystan's wars. These were their sons, nephews, and even some grandsons. They would have grown up on the tales of the last emperor's conquests. The tales passed down had been tales of glory, prestige, honor, and wealth.

More than a few soldiers had changed their families' fortunes after time spent serving abroad. Emperor Drystan was generous with what he captured and even the pages had returned with a share of the spoils. There was even a word for them—the soldiering gentry. Towns and villages across the empire were seeded with men who had returned home just wealthy enough to buy a flour mill or a team of plough horses

or a neighbor's plot of land. Perhaps hire a few extra hands to help with the planting and the harvest.

They were not rich in the way the nobles might think, but in those small towns, they could live quite respectably. Over time, the wars of conquest had been glamorized as a time of prosperity and opportunity. More than once, Amira had heard young men working at the docks or the market wish that they had only been born in time for the conquests of Drystan.

But this war would be nothing like that. There would be no wealth and no spoils. At best, they would stop the advance of a demon horde.

"How do we prepare them?" Amira murmured, keeping her voice down. "*Can* we prepare them?"

"The soldiers?"

"Yes."

Sair exhaled, lifting her skirts to step over a fallen log. "I am not sure. We don't fully know what the cythraul might be capable of."

"They can affect weather, right? Might they be able to manipulate storms?"

"No." Sair didn't sound entirely certain, but contemplative. "According to Kaphen, witchcraft is a function of manipulating the realms between realms. I don't think cythraul in possession of bodies can do it."

"Hmm." That would explain why Caa Iss and Saan Thii had not used magic—or the demonic version of it.

"You would know better than me," Sair said. "You've fought them hand to hand. Two of them."

"True." Amira sighed. She had been over this so many times it made her head hurt. "But...only two."

"Both were princes."

Amira shrugged. Perhaps she had bested two cythraul. Both times, she'd had help.

“If you can defeat the greater denizens, I have every confidence you can take on the lesser.”

Amira swallowed. “How many do you think there are?” They had all discussed this at great length last night without coming to a real conclusion.

Sair shook her head. “I don’t know.”

They continued circling the camp. There were some thousand men with them and another two thousand still planning to join them from the surrounding garrisons along their route to Thurston.

Amira hesitated, a question burning on her tongue. She had never thought of a diplomatic way to ask it and perhaps she shouldn’t try. “You were at the tower, weren’t you?”

Sair’s arm stiffened and she watched straight ahead, toward the patchy darkness of the tents and cookfires. “Yes,” she answered softly. “I was a girl, but yes.”

Amira felt the scars on her arms tingle at the memory, but she licked her lips and continued. “When Caa Iss...took Drystan. What happened?”

Sair shook her head. “We performed the...ritual.” She swallowed. “I was there, yes. Forgive me.”

Amira nodded. It stung to hear, but Amira had expected it. Sair would have been only thirteen or fourteen. A child herself.

“And then the catapults struck us,” Sair said. “They smashed through the side of the room where we’d hidden, even through the wards we’d placed around the tower. We were stronger then, but even the strongest spells can only take so much.” Sair’s fingers squeezed Amira’s arm. “Are you sure you want to hear this?”

“I do.” Amira kept her voice flat. She refused to get emotional about what had happened. It was in the past. Drystan was dead. She was not. The Istovari who had tried to

sacrifice her had begged her forgiveness and given her allegiance. She had won.

“We couldn’t control him,” Sair whispered. “We thought we could, but...” Sair shook her head. “Cythraul are bound by their agreements, but there seems to be room if they misunderstand or if they ignore details.”

“What do you mean?” Amira had never heard the full story of what Caa Iss had done when he was summoned.

“We tore the veil and he stepped through. Caa Iss, but in his true form. I believe you saw that in Kelamora.” Sair stopped, her breath hitching softly. She stared into the darkness, straight ahead. “And he attacked us. The nearest sorceress was torn into pieces before we could stop him.”

“He was angry?” Amira had thought cythraul wanted nothing more than freedom.

“I thought so, but now...” Sair considered it. “He licked her blood off his talons like a starving hound.”

Amira had noticed that cythraul were enamored with all aspects of the physical world—touching, tasting, drinking, eating, and mating. “How did you stop him?”

“We didn’t.” Sair sighed and continued walking. “He seemed to become insubstantial the longer he was in our world and then we were able to force him into possessing the emperor.”

“And what happened after?”

A pair of soldiers passed them and seemed to recognize their guards. The men saluted and Amira saluted back.

“We weren’t sure it had worked,” Sair admitted. “The army came after us and we fled. Many of us didn’t make it, as I’m sure you’ve heard.”

Amira nodded. That day was a day spoken of in whispers and horror by everyone who had been involved. There had been no winners in that battle. Everyone had lost something.

“We created the Cursewood as soon as we reached the forest. I think you know the rest.”

“But Caa Iss was able to walk about freely before he possessed the emperor?”

“For a time,” Sair admitted.

A cold sensation wormed in Amira’s gut. Caa Iss had been walking free last she had seen him. If he was still loose...

“We meddled with powers we did not understand,” Sair admitted. “Just as Vesha has.”

Amira pursed her lips, thinking.

There were holes in Amira’s memory from that day. She wasn’t sure if she had been unconscious or simply forgotten. She remembered bleeding out on the floor at the center of a circle of Istovari sorceresses. She remembered her mother crying and the Elder Mother’s knife slashing her arms.

After that...Amira remembered noise. So much noise she had been sure her ears would burst.

Then there was a man. Probably one of the emperor’s Kadra’han. He’d dragged her up out of the rubble and carried her back to the imperial side of the army. She didn’t remember much, only that his face had been obscured by a helmet and his armor had dug into her cheek.

Now she wondered if it had been Captain Darrigan.

Amira didn’t regret killing the captain, but she knew she wouldn’t have been able to do it unless he’d planned for it. The captain had tried to kill her husband, but in the end had saved both of them, in his own way.

She wished she could hate the man. It would make things easier. But she realized that the two of them were more similar than not. The biggest difference was that her liege had loved her back. Vesha had been content to use the guard captain until it killed him.

Darrigan should have been comfortably retired years ago. Then again, he would have probably hated that.

Amira sighed. "I assume there are limitations on the things. Else we would have been attacked by now."

"Probably," Sair agreed. "Vesha would only be raiding villages if she had no choice."

"I don't see what she has to gain from wholesale slaughter." Amira shook her head. "For someone who preached protecting the empire for so long, it didn't take much for her to turn to raping and burning it."

The forest was quiet, covered in a filmy haze of *ka*. Insects and small forms of life scurried through it, but nothing larger than a squirrel. Rabbits, deer, and foxes knew to avoid people this close to the capital.

There was nothing of alarm, but Amira did feel better having checked.

"Are we sure Vesha is in control?" Sair asked.

It had been so long since either of them had spoken, Amira had forgotten what they were talking about.

"What?"

"The cythraul." Sair raised her chin, inhaling a slow breath. "Are we sure that she is in control?"

Amira shrugged. "Who else could it be? The description sounds like her. What are the odds that two dark-haired women of the same age would both be witches around this same time?"

"Are we sure they aren't using her?" Sair glanced at Amira, then back to the path in front of them. She stepped over an exposed root. "Cythraul always win every bargain struck."

"Vesha has never yielded control to anyone."

"Again." Sair sounded hesitant, like she thought Amira might be offended by what was coming next. "She planned to yield control."

Amira felt fear simmer deep inside her chest. It was a clawing feeling, like falling with no way to stop. She had no good argument against Sair and as she considered it...

“Cythaul are not all-seeing. Nor are they all-knowing.” Sair didn’t face Amira again, but her grip squeezed on the other woman’s arm. “They can be outsmarted. And they can be defeated.”

As they finished their circuit of the camp, Daindreth’s command tent came back into view. It appeared he and Thadred were seated beside a campfire with a few of the other men. Looking closer, Amira saw they weren’t officers like she’d thought at a first glance. From the knots on their collars, a few were sergeants and a few enlisted men. They spoke quietly, but they seemed to be conversing amicably.

Daindreth thought he wasn’t a warrior like his father, that he couldn’t lead. But he was wrong.

Men followed leaders, not warriors. A great warrior might win battles, but a great leader could unite great warriors. Amira had seen enough of the world to know that.

“The sooner we find Vesha and put her down, the better,” Amira said.

Sair was quiet for a moment. “It is death for her, then?”

Amira grimaced. She might have to go behind Daindreth’s back, as much as she hated it. But Vesha was too great a threat. “Yes.”

Chapter Nine

Vesha

“Your Majesty, please have something to eat.” Odette knelt beside Vesha. “Please.”

Vesha didn't think she could eat. She didn't think she could eat ever again. But Odette was crying and so she took the offered biscuit from the other woman's hand. It was hard, more a rock than bread. It came apart thick and heavy, nothing like the light rolls and sweet breads of the palace.

Vesha crumbled the bread in her hands piece by piece. The pieces reminded her of the brains inside those people after the cythraul had cracked their skulls open.

“My lady.” Odette caught her hands and tried to place a small bite in Vesha's mouth.

Vesha complied and swallowed. The bread went down grainy, rubbing along her sore throat. She had screamed herself hoarse, ordering the cythraul to stand down, to stop.

They had ignored her.

Even Caa Iss had left her to rove about the slaughter, laughing and making suggestions to the others.

Vesha had gaps in her memory from that day. Images and sounds patched together like a badly sewn garment in her mind. She could have asked Odette what had happened. From how the girl sobbed, Vesha guessed that Odette remembered much more.

The handmaiden kept feeding Vesha bite by bite, working past her own tears. Her face was red and blotched, swollen from too many days of weeping.

She reached up and pulled twigs from Vesha's hair. Her sleeve slid back and a dark circle caught the empress's eye.

“Odette.” Vesha grasped the girl's wrist. She pushed back her handmaiden's sleeve.

Dark bruises marred Odette's forearm, the fingerprints of a large hand. Odette yanked her arm free, pulling her sleeve back down. "Forgive me, my lady."

"Were you hurt?" Vesha demanded, the words coming out as more of a croak.

Odette shook her head, lowering it to her lap. "I don't want any trouble, my lady. Please don't press the matter."

Anger bubbled up in Vesha's chest, the first time she had felt anything besides despair in days. "Which of them did this?"

"Please, Your Majesty," Odette implored. "I just...let it be."

Vesha noticed then that the collar of Odette's dress had been torn, the edges tied together in a weak effort at mending. Vesha looked closer and noticed more bruises marring Odette's temple, partially hidden by her hair. "What happened?"

Odette shook her head. "I got in the way."

Vesha stopped pushing the issue. For now. She squinted against the sun, just lowering near the horizon. It had been four days since the town. Four days since they had torn apart that settlement like paper. Vesha sensed Caa Iss before he spoke.

"Once you finish eating, we are ready to begin moving, my lady." Caa Iss sounded casual, unconcerned.

Vesha glared up at him. He liked to perch higher than her so he could stare down. "Who touched my handmaiden?"

Odette quailed and lowered her head. She curled in on herself, like she was trying to make herself a smaller target.

Caa Iss shrugged. "Lots of us have touched her. I believe you yourself touched her as I was walking up here and—"

"Who left the bruises?" Vesha demanded, getting to the point.

"Hmm. Which bruise?"

Vesha saw the world in red for an instant. “Answer me!”

Caa Iss flinched and he shifted onto his back foot. “That was some of the princes. They got carried away last night.”

Vesha looked back to Odette.

“You gave them permission,” Caa Iss said. “You told them that so long as they didn’t do any permanent damage, it was fine. And as you know, bruises aren’t permanent.”

“I did not.” Vesha wouldn’t have done that. Never.

“You did.” The hint of a smirk shaped Caa Iss’ mouth.

Vesha looked back to her handmaiden. The one person who had not abandoned her through all this—the one person here who had done nothing wrong. “Odette?”

The girl shook her head, keeping her face toward the ground. “Please, my lady. I want to forget.”

Shame rose in Vesha, bubbling up and threatening to swallow her whole. She wanted to apologize, to ask forgiveness. But no words seemed adequate.

Vesha was already guilty for more crimes than forgiveness could ever cover. What difference did a few more make?

She considered sending Odette away. The safest place for anyone was away from these creatures. But she didn’t trust the cythraul not to attack the girl.

Vesha inhaled a slow breath and let it out again. She stood.

They were in a sheltered hollow covered by trees with ferns underfoot. The low hum of voices came from around them. The rest of the cythraul were near but leaving them alone for now.

“There’s another town ahead,” Caa Iss purred. “It’s been three days since the last one, so we wondered if we might pay a visit.”

“We don’t have time for this,” Vesha snapped. “We must find the Mirror.” The sooner this was over, the sooner Vesha

could hand control over to Moreyne.

Vesha desperately wanted it to be over. All of it.

Voices rose outside the alcove, laughter and a hint of excitement. Something twitched inside Vesha, some knowledge that warned her what was about to happen. She rose, dirt raining to the ground.

She realized then that she had been sitting on the loose earth. She was covered in dirt, her delicate lady's slippers worn with holes. The delicate embroidery along the sleeves of her dress had started to fray and the skirt was torn in several places.

Where had she gotten this dress? Had it been Zeyna's? Vesha didn't remember and it terrified her. She'd handed Odette off to the mercies of the cythraul. What else had she done in those gaps of her memory?

The voices of the cythraul rose higher. They could only be cythraul voices. There was a distinctness to them. Something inhuman.

Vesha climbed out of the alcove, using her hands to find purchase on the loose soil. Odette had probably brought them here for privacy and some semblance of safety, but it was surprisingly hard to climb out.

"My lady!" Odette clung close to her side, either from fear or concern. Maybe both.

Vesha climbed out to find a swarm. They were a swarm now, there was little else to describe it. The last of the cythraul without bodies had taken hosts.

Some thousand or more shapes gathered around the surrounding trees. They crouched around fires that they had just taught themselves to make, chewed on bones of last night's meal, bickered with one another, and played with their clothes.

Vesha had been told of foreign tribes where they pierced their tongues and scarred their skin to decorate it. She'd often

thought those people must be savages, but no. This was savagery. The utter lack of humanity made her skin crawl.

She doubted if there was anything human about these beings, but if there was, it was all the worst traits. It was gluttony, lust, greed, spite, and selfishness carried to the extreme.

Vesha watched as two cythraul fought over an ironwork bracelet that was too small for either of them. They cursed and bit each other, scrapping on the ground while their brothers and sisters looked on, laughing.

Another in a female body squatted beside a tree, naked from the waist down. One hand worked furiously between its legs. Vesha realized what she was seeing and looked away, but not before she noticed the creature's hand was bloody. Why, she didn't want to guess.

"My lady." Araa Oon was the first to meet her. "Someone approaches, my lady."

Vesha cocked her head to the side. Her first thought was Daindreth. Surely, he would be coming for her. But no. It was too soon. He might have been crowned, but there was no way he could be here already. "Who is it?"

"I don't know," Araa Oon admitted. "They appear to be armed, but they are keeping their distance. They spotted our scouts, I think, then stopped."

"Hmm." Vesha looked through the trees. Several cythraul stood, excited and curious at the approach of the newcomers. "How many?"

"Only a few dozen, as best I can tell," Araa Oon said. "As I said, they are keeping their distance."

Vesha looked up. The sun was setting. "Have the horde ready," she ordered. "I want us to move as soon as the dark descends."

"As you wish." Araa Oon could impose some discipline on the others, but it seemed limited. The imps were most obedient

when he gave orders, but the others would follow if on guard duty or when Vesha gave direct commands.

Most of the time.

Vesha had been so sure she was in control of the horde until she had tried to stop them at that village. None of them had cared. No threat had worked. One of the creatures, she hadn't seen which, had shoved her against a wall so hard she'd struck her head and blacked out for a moment.

They were a strange menagerie of faces and bodies, totally unlike aside from the glowing red eyes. Cythraul required stronger minds and stronger wills to keep them on task. Stupid, lazy, ungrateful—

The vision in Vesha's god-eye blurred, washing red for a moment. Vesha blinked until her vision returned to normal.

Vesha watched as Araa Oon collected the cythraul together. The creatures had no inhibitions, no sense of purpose. They should have had less of a mind of their own. They were useless with minds as it was.

Araa Oon mobilized their troops—Vesha guessed they numbered over a thousand now. Caa Iss lumbered along at Vesha's side, shadowing her like an ill omen.

It was still an hour or so until sunset, but Vesha didn't want to wait. The more they moved, the less trouble these creatures could get themselves into.

Odette stayed close, casting about in every direction with fearful eyes. Vesha hated that the girl had gotten caught up in this. Hated that the girl had been hurt because of this. Vesha should have left her in Iandua when she had the chance.

Finally, Araa Oon had gathered the horde and they began their slow march out of the forest. Vesha saw no sign of anyone watching or chasing them.

The sun was in their eyes and some of the creatures complained. Vesha snarled at them to keep moving and this time they obeyed.

Odette tripped and stumbled, clinging to Vesha's arm for support at times. Vesha might have been annoyed by it under different circumstances, but she would never complain of anything Odette did ever again.

They cleared the trees and came into a tilled field. Rows of earth stretched in every direction.

"It must take more than a hundred men to plough this field. There must be a village near here," Caa Iss purred. "A large one indeed."

"We don't have time." Vesha kept her attention ahead as they slogged through the soft earth. The ground was moist. This would be fertile ground. That would be a good thing for the harvest, but a bad thing in this moment.

"What is that stench?" one of the cythraul hissed. Several of them joined in, expressing their disgust.

"That's fertilizer," Vesha said. She smelled it, too, but after weeks of living with the cythraul, she barely noticed. She wasn't sure how the cythraul were able to notice either. The creatures had little sense of hygiene and if she hadn't said something to Caa Iss, she expected they would have sat in their own excrement.

It had been an age and half since most of them had bodies. Vesha shuddered to think what would happen when the rest of the cythraul were released.

The rest? That was an odd thought. In truth, she wasn't sure how many cythraul were with her now, or how many might still be in the Dread Marches.

Several cythraul came too close together and one shoved the other. They scrambled on the ground, fighting and bickering until one of the others grabbed the offenders and dragged them to their feet.

Thankfully, more of the cythraul princes seemed willing to help keep order. Perhaps they were as tired of their siblings' squabbling as Vesha was.

Cries of excitement came from the cythraul in the lead. Vesha couldn't make out what they said, but she heard their doglike exclamations and cries. Just like dogs, nothing excited them more than the prospect of fresh meat.

"The strangers follow us," Caa Iss rumbled. "This should be interesting."

Vesha glanced over her shoulder. She didn't see it at first, but then she noticed several shapes. There they were, ant-like at this distance. "Farmers," Vesha guessed. "Probably wondering who's walking all over their fields."

"Hmm." Caa Iss licked his incorporeal lips. He had several habits like that, leftovers from his time in a body. "I wonder if they will try to drive us off." Like the lesser demons, there was a hint of excitement in his tone at that.

Vesha exhaled, not particularly looking forward to whatever was about to happen next. She had a feeling these farmers might try to be brave.

Her eye itched. Vesha had the urge to scratch it, but when she did, she found the flesh hot and tender. Had she been scratching at it this whole time without realizing?

She almost ran into the cythraul stopped in front of her. "What's this?" Vesha demanded, glaring as the other cythraul around her jostled to a stop. "What is the meaning of this?"

Caa Iss towered above Vesha, easily seeing over the heads of the others. He cocked his head to the side. "I suppose these men would rather die."

Vesha peered past the bodies in front of her.

It appeared that a second group of farmers had laid in wait in front of them, barring the way with as many shovels, staves, axes, pitchforks, and whatever else they had been able to get their hands on.

Vesha made her way to the front of their ragtag troop, her heart in her throat. She didn't want another massacre. Didn't. But this...

The farmers stood before them, perhaps a hundred or so of their number. Vesha considered it.

“You’re in our way,” Vesha called. “That’s unwise.”

She glanced along the line of men, ranging in age from perhaps ten to sixty. If she had to guess, these were tenant farmers who worked the fields for the local lord.

“Go back!” one man shouted.

“Go back!” agreed another.

Vesha exhaled a short breath. “You’re outnumbered,” she tried to shout over their angry voices. “I’d suggest you let us pass—”

One of the men tossed a torch onto the ground. Fire wicked over the dark soil, rushing toward Vesha and the cythraul fast—too fast.

Resin. That was what the cythraul had smelled.

Vesha stumbled back as the first of the flames reached her. More smoke than fire filled the air, but the flames spread fast. In seconds, several cythraul had caught fire and were squealing in pain.

A number of the pigs had been smeared in pitch as they’d walked across the fields. The imps in their porcine bodies rolled and charged in no particular direction.

Now Vesha realized the sticky stains on her dress weren’t dirt. They weren’t fertilizer, either.

The field had been soaked in resin. And Vesha had just led the cythraul straight through it.

“My lady!” Odette pulled her back as the flames leapt up, a wall of heat knocking her back.

Fire surrounded them from all sides and smoke obscured Vesha’s vision. Rocks pelted them from above as the farmers hurled stones.

Covering her head with her arms, Vesha stumbled back, coughing on smoke. None of the cythraul reached out to help her, they were too concerned with protecting themselves.

A few charged the farmers, screaming and yowling in fury, their clothes on fire and human hands outstretched like claws. They seemed to forget that they were in human bodies. They might be stronger now, they might heal faster now, but—

The first cythraul never reached the farmers, felled by a rain of rocks. The second got a little farther, but not much before a stone clipped her in the temple and took her down.

Vesha looked on in shock as the first of the cythraul broke. The imps in their pig bodies charged back for the trees, several screaming as their flanks burned with fire.

Araa Oon shouted, trying to regain control. But then his clothes caught flame, and he dropped to smear them with dirt. That only made it worse, and the flames rose higher.

Odette and Vesha scrambled on the ground, dodging the stampeding cythraul and the lines of flame. The fire snaked around them in haphazard patterns, following the lines of resin. The sticky pine sap was hard to work with and hard to harvest, but it seemed the farmers had brought out their best for the occasion.

The cythraul scrambled in opposite directions, some trying to attack the farmers and some trying to run away. A second group of farmers rushed down the hill, hurling rocks and wielding axes.

These men weren't trained soldiers, but no one understood working together like farmers. And unity had never been a cythraul virtue.

They might be the denizens of Moreyne, but they had never been especially selfless. And all had been driven at least a little mad by centuries in the Dread Marches.

Caa Iss hovered over Vesha as if to shield her. All the same, a rock sailed through him to strike Vesha's back, knocking her to the ground.

A stone hit Odette in the shoulder, and she cried out. Blood showed beneath her torn sleeve.

“Get in front of me,” Vesha ordered, shoving the girl ahead of her as they fled the farmers.

“My lady, I—”

“I command you!” Vesha pushed the girl so that she was between the handmaiden and their attackers. “Go!”

A shriek sounded from behind, a human shriek. Vesha turned back in time to see one of the cythraul on top of a farmer, ripping his neck out with their teeth.

The farmers, to their credit, fell on the attacking cythraul with gusto. They battered and beat her to the ground, but that left an opening for the next creature to attack them from the side.

The lines clashed and they fought, but yet...the cythraul ran, fought, or scattered. It didn't seem to matter. Even Araa Oon was nowhere to be seen.

“What should we do?” Vesha cried to Caa Iss. Hope of rallying the cythraul into ranks was gone.

The big demon ruffled his broken wings. He glanced around. “I don't see any of the other princes.”

Vesha cursed as she had never cursed before. What good were princes if they fled at the first sign of trouble?

Resin burned hot, but it burned fast. The flames burned into smoke, leaving the stench of pitch.

“That way,” Caa Iss gestured to the west. “Head that way.”

Vesha shoved Odette toward the west, doing her best to keep her head down. One hand shoved the girl and the other held her skirt out of the way.

The cythraul could have overpowered the farmers if they had stuck together. Vesha had wanted an army. This was just a rabble.

Odette screamed and fell. Her temple bled from a stone strike. She stumbled, clutching her head and trying to shield her face.

Vesha tripped over her just as a group of farmers burst through the smoke, axes and shovels held over their heads. They came at the women shouting, but a shape slammed into them from the side.

The cythraul that now inhabited Cashun blocked them, shielding her with a toothy grin. He wrested the axe from the nearest farmer and smashed it straight into the man's face. Blood sprayed and the body hit the ground.

Vesha was glad Odette's head was down and she didn't see it. The next moment, more and more cythraul came rushing to protect her, circling around the empress in a vanguard.

In a sickening instant, she recognized the faces of her Kadra'han. The men who she had forced to become hosts now protected her—or at least their cythraul did.

A rock hit Cashun in the head and he stumbled, swinging for the legs of a young man with dirt-smudged hands. He struck and took the young man down, but another attacked with a pitchfork, spearing him through the side before he could recover.

The mob of strangers descended, hacking him down before he could get up. The cythraul that inhabited Cashun grinned at Vesha and then his eyes winked out.

The man who hit the dirt on his hands and knees *was* Cashun—just Cashun. The cythraul had abandoned him. Blood spewed out his mouth and a thousand mad blows descended on him.

The young, promising Kadra'han was beaten to death by a mob of farmers, kneeling before his empress.

“Let's go!” Caa Iss snarled, pacing to and fro, all but useless in the moment.

Vesha's vision blurred and she wasn't sure if it was from smoke or tears.

Several pockets of cythraul had gathered in bands to attack the farmers. They had obtained cudgels and axes from their foes. Some had picked up rocks to throw back. The stones they hurled flew with deadly force, splitting open skulls and cracking apart ribcages when they struck.

Vesha forced herself to look forward. These were her people. The people of the empire. And yet they died all around her.

"Keep moving!" Caa Iss bellowed. "Get up, woman. Leave the maid, if you must."

Vesha wasn't leaving Odette. She grabbed the girl's arm and dragged her along. Odette stumbled, holding onto her head. She moaned softly, but Vesha held onto her in a viselike grip.

They turned their backs on the carnage and madness, running across the field under the cover of smoke. More and more cythraul raced after Vesha, following either her or the shape of Caa Iss.

They ran headlong toward what Vesha hoped was safety. Or at least as much safety as could be hoped for when one kept company with demons.

Chapter Ten

Thadred

Thadred hadn't wanted to volunteer to scout, but Sair had volunteered, and he didn't trust the imperial guards to protect her as well as they should. There was still too much distrust of sorceresses, too much bad blood.

Sair carried herself straight and elegant. No one would guess she usually rode mules and farm horses.

Lleuad ambled, tail swishing calmly. So long as the larger coursers didn't come too close, he seemed alright with the other soldiers' horses.

Most of the imperial roads were well-maintained this near the capital, but Thurston was a small backwater town. It hardly warranted any attention at all. The roads here narrowed, not used to supporting hundreds of soldiers. It was the perfect place for an ambush.

So they'd been sending scouts with a few of the Istovari to check for signs of cythraul. Thadred wasn't sure he could spot a cythraul at the distance Amira could, but he might be able to help give some advance warning.

The road was quiet apart from the clop of the horses' hooves and a few birds. Spring had come to Erymaya and though some areas might be suffering floods, fires, earthquakes, and every other kind of disaster, many parts of the empire toddled along as if nothing had happened.

Lleuad snorted, stamping his hooves.

Thadred ignored it.

The little stallion pinned his ears, head lolling toward the horse at his side.

"Stop it." Thadred snapped his reins.

Lleuad hopped once, a half-hearted buck. He pinned his ears back further and snorted, flexing harder to the left.

“No!” Thadred kicked Lleuad in the ribs. “Settle.”

Lleuad let off a growl that was more like a wolf than a horse.

Sair’s horse whickered next to Lleuad. The palfrey’s ears twitched. Then the horse of the lead rider balked, shying sideways. A horse behind them let off a plaintive sound of fear.

Thadred made a note to apologize to Lleuad later. He straightened, keeping one hand on the reins while the other went to his sword. “What is it?”

He reached around him, trying to sense *ka*. He could feel it. The power was all around him. They were in a forest. *Ka* was thick like a smog.

“There’s something there.” Sair nodded to the trees at their left, where the horses stared. “Something...” She shook her head. “I can’t tell, but it—”

“Shit!” Thadred yanked on the reins to keep Lleuad from charging.

The little black stallion snorted and stamped his hooves. He pawed at the ground like an angry bull. Whatever was in those trees, Lleuad wanted a piece of it.

But charging headlong at things was a great way to get yourself—and your rider—killed.

Something snorted and snuffled. It came into view—scruffy brown body with dark brindle stripes. It rooted along the ground, nosing at acorns.

“Is that a pig?” one of the soldiers asked.

Lleuad snorted again, pawing at the gravel.

The pig looked up.

Lleuad growled, his whole body vibrating.

Beady red eyes blinked at them. They were definitely glowing.

The pig made a snorting, keening sound.

Pigs were vicious creatures. Built like bricks with tearing jaws and a penchant to eat anything—*anything*—they were as versatile as they were dangerous. There was a reason they were counted as deadly game along with lions and bears.

But this pig was...

“What is it?” one of the soldiers demanded.

“It’s possessed.” Thadred leaned forward in his saddle. “A cythraul.”

Sair’s voice was steady, but with a tremor of anxiety. “Thadred, there’s more of them.”

“Of course, there is.” Thadred wasn’t sure what else he expected. It was only natural that the group of soldiers he happened to lead would happen to run into a group of possessed pigs. “You agree they’re cythraul?”

“I think so,” Sair answered, voice a low rasp. “Their *ka* is unnatural. Somehow.”

“How many?”

Sair squinted into the trees and nodded after a moment. “Perhaps two or three more. About the same size.”

Delightful.

Four demonic pigs were more than enough to wreak havoc on their band of ten soldiers and a sorceress. Not enough to overpower them, surely, but enough to be dangerous.

“Alright, men,” Thadred straightened, keeping his hands on Lleud’s reins. “Archers, get ready, but don’t loose yet.”

“Sir.” The soldier on horseback to Thadred’s left replied, but didn’t take his attention off the pig. Wise of him.

“If things go wrong, you’re to take Lady Sairydwen and get her back to the army as quickly as possible. Do you understand?”

The sergeant nodded. “Yes, lord.”

Thadred glanced at Sair. She swallowed but didn't argue.

They could probably outrun these pigs. Horses were much faster than swine, but possessed humans were capable of impossible things. Why not possessed pigs?

“Archers, hold a moment. Hold.” Thadred held back Lleuad as the little stallion snapped his teeth, hooves tearing up the dirt. At least one of them was spoiling for a fight.

Just as Sair said, three more porcine faces shoved out of the greenery. They were a large boar that would have been up to Lleuad's chest and two smaller gilts. Despite being smaller, the gilts' eyes glittered orange, cocking their heads in a way that was more snake than pig.

“There you are,” Thadred crooned, signaling to the archers. “Good piggies. Nice piggies.”

They had black soot or perhaps burn scars on their flanks, hindquarters, and legs. Had they run into a bit of trouble?

When the archers were ready, he nodded to the four of them. “On the count of three, I want you to shoot the boar first.” Best to start with the biggest one and hopefully drop the biggest threat. “One, two—”

The pigs let off a shriek at once, leaping into the air. They charged, making the horses balk. The archers loosed, but their shots missed.

Lleuad was the only horse that didn't spook. The little stallion lunged straight for the nearest pig, one of the gilts. She tried to bite his leg, but whether the pig was cythraul or not, it must not have known what a kelpie was.

Lleuad kicked the pig in the snout, making her squeal. The pig tried to run. Never one to show mercy, the little horse grabbed her back leg, right above her hock.

This was exactly why Thadred had decided to use bitless bridles for the horse. He grabbed a fistful of the kelpie's mane and braced himself.

Lleuad slung the pig through the air and slammed her back down. Something cracked and Thadred cringed despite himself. The pig squealed, an eerie, uncanny scream that sounded nothing like a pig.

One of the larger pigs tried to help her and Lleuad spun around, smacking the bigger pig in the face with the smaller one.

Around them, men shouted and horses screamed. The larger boar had gone for Sair and she clung to her horse with one hand, working spells with the other.

Lleuad kept slinging the gilt around like a flail, kicking her with his front hooves and smashing her into the ground. The other gilt had disappeared.

The larger sow, the first pig they'd seen, tried to attack Lleuad, but one of the soldiers speared her haunches with his halberd. The sow shrieked one of those unholy, demonic howls and took off running.

The boar faced down Sair. She remained aboard her horse with one hand outstretched, the ripples of *ka* around her as she worked a spell. The boar thrashed his head, stomping and blinking.

Fear for Sair rose in Thadred's chest, but two soldiers stabbed for the boar with their spears, shearing along its thick hide. The pig spun on the nearest horse while its wounds closed in front of their eyes. It lunged at the spear, but the soldier behind it didn't give up. He stabbed down, jabbing again and again at the pig's hindquarters and spine.

A third soldier joined them, spearing the pig through the side. The boar squealed and twisted around, but the other two soldiers kept stabbing.

The boar went down, rooting and grunting and making strange noises that weren't quite pig sounds. Its eyes flickered out and it collapsed.

The soldiers kept stabbing, though, tearing the creature apart.

The gilt in Lleuad's jaws hung limp, smashed and mangled. The stallion dropped the carcass and kicked at it a few more times.

"I think you got her." Thadred squinted down at the corpse beneath Lleuad's hooves.

The stallion blew out a long breath, splattering blood with his exhale. He swished his tail, ears still flicking with tension.

"Is everyone alright?" Thadred looked around their ragtag group of fighters. "Is anyone hurt?"

The soldiers and Sair panted. A few of their horses had bites and scrapes, but no people appeared injured. They looked down at the pig bodies on the ground.

"We're alright, I think, sir," the sergeant panted.

"What was this?"

"I think the cythraul can possess animals now." Thadred looked to Sair, brows furrowed in a question.

Sair shrugged. She wasn't sure, either.

"I've seen bad-tempered pigs," panted one of the soldiers, "but I've never seen pigs act like that."

"Not pigs." Thadred straightened, gathering Lleuad's reins. "Cythraul." He patted Lleuad's neck in apology. He'd have to think twice before scolding the little stallion in the future. Lleuad didn't seem to hold a grudge. If anything, he seemed to have enjoyed himself. Thadred glanced to Sair. "Do you think they'll make good eating?"

"Thadred!"

"What?" Thadred shrugged, looking back to the dead pigs. Seemed like a waste of good meat.

"Did we find Vesha?" Sair asked. "Is she nearby?"

"She must be." A sudden acrid odor grabbed his attention. "Can you smell that?"

"What?" Sair looked back to him.

“Smells like...” Thadred twisted in his saddle. “Fire?”

“Some of the farmers use fire to clear their fields in spring,” one of the soldiers offered. “That’s how my grandfather used to do it.”

“Yes, but look.” Thadred pointed to the dead boar and what remained of the young gilt. “They’re covered in soot.”

A look of understanding passed between the soldiers, Thadred, and Sair.

“How far away do you think the farmland is?” one of the soldiers asked, shifting in his saddle. “Maybe a few miles?”

Thadred grimaced, glancing to Sair.

The sorceress cast him a hesitant look.

Thadred considered their next course of action. He would guess that these cythraul inhabiting pigs weren’t alone. If they were here, the red-eyed horde would have to be close, too. That posed a few problems.

First, these pigs didn’t seem to have any direction. That might mean they’d had different motives or that they really were mindless creatures interested only in violence. That would be an issue if Thadred and the others ran into more of them.

They could fight off a few, but not a dozen or more.

“We can go back,” he mused.

Lleuad ripped a chunk of flesh out of the gilt’s corpse and began chewing. One of the soldiers let off a yelp and two others exclaimed in surprise.

Thadred waved away their concerns. “Yes, kelpies eat meat. Not to worry.”

Lleuad tore at the pig’s haunch eagerly, tail swishing. He pawed at the corpse, nibbling at the bloody spots.

“We can go forward,” Thadred said, “see where the smell of smoke is coming from.”

“Or we can go back,” the lieutenant said, eyes still wide and on the kelpie. “Inform Captain Westfall and His Majesty.”

Thadred grimaced. “I’d rather not head back to His Majesty with nothing but a story of demon pigs.” He looked down at the corpses. This would be alarming, but it would raise more questions than answers.

“We don’t know what lies ahead,” the lieutenant replied.

“Sir, if I may.” The sergeant inclined his head in respect. “The emperor sent us to scout precisely because we didn’t know what lies ahead.

Thadred looked to Sair. She was the oldest person in their group and she was, he believed, also the wisest. “Lady Sairydwen?”

Sair gathered the reins of her palfrey, patting the animal’s neck. “We find the source of the smoke. It might be farmers burning their fields, though it’s a little late in the year for that. But it might be of importance.” Sair straightened in her saddle.

Thadred nodded. “The lady has spoken.” He pulled on Lleuad’s reins, dragging the horse away from his pork feast. “See? Lleuad thinks they make good eating.”

Sair rolled her eyes.

“What? It looks like some good ham on these things. I bet their bacon is good, too.”

“We are not eating demonic bacon, Thadred.”

Thadred laughed as they fell into line. Sometimes, when faced with a possibly life-ending situation, it was good to laugh. Even Sair cracked a smile despite herself.

They continued, the soldiers and the horses now on high alert. The men kept searching the trees, never settling their eyes in one place.

Sair continued keeping watch on the forest. Thadred still couldn’t sense anything beyond the scope of their immediate group.

He still struggled to sense the *ka* of things he couldn't see. Sometimes, he wondered if he wasn't just imagining *ka*. Then he would work a spell and it would remind him that he was a sorcerer after all.

They ventured farther and farther down the road. The smell of smoke grew stronger and stronger. Twice the soldiers thought they saw something, but it turned out to be a squirrel and then a deer leaping across their path. Nothing was chasing either animal as best they could tell.

Thadred guessed they had traveled two or three miles from where they were attacked by the pigs. Perhaps more?

The smell of burning hung in the air. As they got closer, the smell took on the greasy, oily stench.

He kept up a brave face, but he looked to the sergeant again. "If anything goes wrong, your orders to protect the sorceress, do you hear me?"

The young man nodded.

"You get her back to the army at any cost."

"Yes, sir." The soldier swallowed.

Sair looked to Thadred, but she didn't argue, though he had the feeling she still wanted to.

The trees rolled back, and a ploughed field stretched to one side of them. Thadred immediately noticed a smoking corpse in the middle of the road ahead.

It was a pig—and this one had not been as lucky as the others. It was scorched with burn marks and appeared to have died flailing in the dirt. Somehow, the animal had been doused in pitch or some other flammable substance. After the fire had gotten good and hot, the pig hadn't been able to save itself.

Thadred had heard of things like this. Pig grease was wonderful for fires. Drystan the Conqueror had once doused a herd of pigs in pitch, set them on fire, and stampeded them toward his enemy's army. The results had been horrifying or

spectacular, depending on which side of the battle you were on that day.

“Another one?” The soldiers approached the corpse carefully.

Open fields stretched toward the west. Ploughed hills as far as the eye could see. The forest hugged one side of the road and open fields lined the other.

“There’s more of them.” One of the soldiers pointed. “And smoke.”

Sure enough, at least two more dead pigs lay in the direction of the smoke. One of them was still burning.

“Let’s circle around this field and see what we can find.” He glanced to Sair. “What are you thinking?”

“Perhaps a farmer’s pigs became possessed and he tried to solve the problem with fire.”

“Maybe.” Someone had certainly known the pigs were dangerous and had tried to deal with them. “But since we ran into four of them, I’m guessing he didn’t do a good job.”

Sair nodded. Things weren’t looking good for this supposed farmer.

They headed along the road that edged around the ploughed fields. Thadred expected to find a farmstead and perhaps a burned-out pigsty.

That dead pig had probably been burning for a few hours. The four they’d encountered had seemed mostly recovered from their burns.

The forest to one side was quiet and calm. The open field on the other was empty as best they could tell. It had been ploughed, but it was empty.

They crested a hill, and finally saw the source of the fires. Dozens—hundreds—of bodies lay scattered on the ground and across the field.

Thadred realized with a sick feeling that those weren't all pig corpses.

Men, women, and children littered the dirt. Many lay charred and burned. Some were bloody. Rocks, axes, pitchforks, and makeshift weapons scattered the field.

"There are so many," the soldiers gasped.

This wasn't the work of a single farmer. This wasn't the work of pigs. This was the work of a mob.

Thadred reined in Lleuad. "Alright. We've come far enough."

"There's nothing living nearby," Sair said quietly. "Not that I can sense at this distance, anyway."

"We're getting reinforcements," Thadred said, making the decision. He wasn't leading these men into what might very well be a trap. Especially not with Sair.

This was carnage. It was wholesale slaughter.

Thadred didn't have all the answers. The pigs didn't fit into the other reports and they were a mile or more from the nearest settlement. Why these people had been out here made no sense, but Thadred didn't need sense right now.

Whoever had done this might not be here now, but they wouldn't be far. Thadred didn't want to meet them without more soldiers.

Chapter Eleven

Amira

Amira was used to death. She'd dealt in it the way any artisan deals in her trade, but like any respectable artisan, she disliked sloppy work.

She'd read the reports from Thurston. A part of her had wondered if they were exaggerated. Now in a field surrounded by ravaged bodies, she didn't think so.

Kneeling beside the remains of a young woman, Amira grimaced. This girl had been young, in her teens. Her clothes were burned, but what remained of them had lace and beading on the tattered hem, not the usual clothes of a farmgirl.

Amira peered at the girl's bloody head. She'd been struck with rocks multiple times. There were bloodstains on her clothes. But there were no bruises, and all the wounds were fresh.

"Cythraul can kill with their bare hands." Amira looked up as Tapios crouched beside her. "Why did they suddenly start using weapons?"

"I don't know," Tapios admitted. He looked over to where the soldiers were inspecting other bodies. "Someone collected enough pine resin to make a kiln. That's what caused the fire."

This had been premeditated. Planned. It didn't sound like the attack on Thurston.

The stench of pitch still lingered in the air. She glanced at the girl's feet. "Where are her shoes?"

Tapios glanced up. "What?"

Amira looked at several of the other bodies. "They're missing shoes."

Tapios pursed his lips. "I suppose they are."

Amira knelt beside the girl's feet, still not touching the body. "Her feet are dirty, but..." Amira frowned at the girl's heels. "No cuts. Not enough calluses, either." Amira glanced around the field.

"This field might be soft enough she could walk without getting cut," Tapios pointed out.

"Maybe." Something was still wrong. Amira couldn't quite put her finger on it. She noticed a cut in the girl's clothes, a blood-soaked hole where the blood had darkened and stained a dark black. Amira pulled aside the surcoat to show that the hole had gone through the shift underneath. "She was stabbed." Both layers of fabric were stained with blackened blood.

"Someone clearly wanted her dead," Tapios muttered.

Amira shook her head. "No. This wound was older. It should have been..." Her words trailed off. The skin beneath the stab in the fabric was whole and unmarred. No sign that there had been any injury at all.

Amira's memory flashed back to when Saan Thii had inhabited Darrigan. Wounds had healed instantly. Same with Caa Iss when he had possessed Daindreth. She remembered shearing her dagger along Daindreth's arm, only to have the wound close seconds later.

She dropped the cloth and glanced to another body, also barefoot.

"Your Grace?" Tapios followed her. "What is it?"

Amira examined the unmarked, uninjured feet of a second corpse. "All their non-lethal wounds healed."

"What do you mean?"

"Walking barefoot across the whole field? Without so much as a scratch?"

"There might be scratches under that dirt," Tapios remarked.

Amira grabbed the corpse's arm and rolled him over. It had been the body of a middle-aged man. Amira looked closer.

Tapios crouched beside her, brows raised. He didn't argue with her, but he seemed skeptical.

Amira found what she was looking for splattered on the front of the man's tunic. "There's old blood on him, too."

Tapios glanced back to the girl's body. "What are you saying?"

Amira dropped the corpse's arm. "They were cythraul. I think." She stepped over to a body with shoes on. This one was dressed as a farmer, an older man perhaps in his sixties. His jaw had been shattered, head snapped back at an unnatural angle. "I think..." Amira pinched the bridge of her nose. She didn't want to make guesses, especially when what she guessed might end up directing Daindreth and the army. "I think..."

Ka hung over the field in a haze, though not as thick as in the forest. The ground was rich with the promise of life, the promise of sustenance. She could feel the life of the soldiers and the rangers as they searched the bodies. Sair was working some minor spells near one of the corpses and Thadred's presence was a steady glow, recognizable by the spells laced through his damaged hip.

Amira looked around, heart pounding. The bodies still had some *ka* left in them. They were newly dead, and most corpses kept power for a time, but there was a clear difference between living and dead bodies. Amira turned slowly, looking toward the left.

"Tapios." Amira pulled a dagger from her boot.

The ranger noticed her draw her weapon and unslung his bow. "Your Grace?"

Amira nodded to a body lying on the ground several paces away. She approached it, blade held easily in one hand. The shape looked battered, bloody, and definitely dead. Yet Amira

still felt his *ka*. Worse, she sensed a golden band of power encircling his throat.

Amira crouched beside the body. Her heart thundered faster as she recognized the torn remains of an imperial uniform. She nodded to Tapios. The ranger nocked an arrow, standing at the ready.

Amira rolled him over.

The young man gasped, eyes wide as he coughed blood.

Amira stepped back, dagger at the ready as she skirted out of reach.

The young man choked, blood bubbling out his mouth.

Amira rolled him onto his side. “Thadred!” she shouted, not looking away from the stranger. “Sair!”

Voices stirred from behind her, shouts of soldiers.

Amira dropped to her knees beside the stranger, not taking her eyes off him. He might be dying, but he might still be dangerous, especially if a cythraul tried to possess him right now.

“You’re a Kadra’han.” It wasn’t a question. Amira held onto the young man’s right hand, as much to keep it in her sight as to comfort him. He wasn’t armed as best she could tell, but she wasn’t risking it.

“Yes,” the young man gasped.

“Vesha’s Kadra’han?”

“Yes,” the young man’s voice was a rasp, a wheeze.

Pity welled in Amira’s heart, a little unexpected. She could sense Sair and Thadred rushing to reach them, but she doubted even with their combined skill they could save him.

Amira touched his chest, feeding power into the mangled mess that was his lungs. He’d been stabbed multiple times and beaten with blunt weapons, judging by the blood stain and the wounds she could sense on his back and torso.

The young man gasped, shaking under her power. She wasn't as good at this as Sair and Thadred.

"What happened?" Amira asked, voice low, but insistent.

"Cythraul," the Kadra'han gasped. "She made us...take them. Ordered us. We..." His breath caught and he choked.

Amira cradled his head and fed more power into him.

The Kadra'han's eyes opened wide, and he focused on her. "The assassin."

"I'm Daindreth's assassin." Amira nodded. "Your name?"

"Lieutenant Cashun." The young man groaned, fighting to keep his eyes open. "Darrigan...ordered us to spare you."

Amira inhaled. That must be why he looked vaguely familiar. This man must have been at Kelamora. "Vesha ordered you to take on cythraul?"

"Yes." Cashun's voice broke.

Amira couldn't deny the pity she felt then, but Cashun's time was short. "What happened here?"

"Attacked," Cashun whispered. "Vesha ran—"

Amira felt the curse yank tight around his throat and she realized Cashun had been trying to betray Vesha. "It's alright," Amira assured him. "It's alright." Even with the *ka* she had given him, Cashun's own *ka* flickered and wavered. He might have still been able to use his Kadra'han bond to make himself stronger, but there didn't seem to be any loyalty to Vesha left in the man.

"Kill her," Cashun whispered. His eyes went wide as the curse tightened around his throat at the traitorous words. "For us."

Amira squeezed his hand. "I will," she promised. "I will kill Vesha for you." She meant it.

Cashun's breath hitched.

Amira pushed more power into him, hoping she was helping and not hurting. “What happened to your cythraul? The creature that possessed you?”

“Gone,” Cashun rasped. “He fled.”

“To the Dread Marches? Do you know?”

“No.” Cashun shook his head. “Loose.

Sair reached them. She looked to Amira.

Amira grimaced. “One of Vesha’s Kadra’han. Can you heal him?”

Sair touched Cashun’s chest. “He’s hurt badly.”

“Can you try?” Amira held onto the man’s hand. “Try to save him?”

“Kill her.” Cashun grabbed Amira’s arm with surprising strength. “Kill that bitch.” As he said it, the golden circle of *ka* around his throat yanked tighter.

“Stop!” Sair commanded. “Your vows will kill you before your wounds do.”

If Cashun heard what Sair said, he didn’t respond. There was a wild, reckless determination in his bloody face as he rasped out, “Kill Vesha.”

Amira tried not to shudder as the dying man looked her square in the eyes. “I will,” she vowed. Amira held him as he trembled, and the life fled from him.

She’d seen life leave people’s eyes before. There was a strange emptiness to corpses, not quite a peace, but more a total absence of the things that caused them pain.

Cashun went limp in Amira’s grasp, his hands slackening on her arms. Sightless eyes stared at the sky. The *ka* around his throat slithered away almost instantly. Most *ka* dissipated slowly, but the curse was gone in a blink.

Cashun had died. His Kadra’han vows were fulfilled—service unto death.

“Did he tell you anything?” Thadred caught up with them, leaning on his cane.

Amira slid Cashun’s eyes closed. “Vesha made him take on a cythraul.” She looked to Thadred, then Sair. “He didn’t say who attacked them, but someone did.”

“Locals, maybe?” Thadred glanced around. “If I was a farmer who heard a horde of murderers was on the way, I might take matters into my own hands.”

“He said his cythraul had left him.” Amira chewed her lip. “That might mean the cythraul can now take a new host instead of being dragged back to the Dread Marches. I’m not sure.” She turned to Sair.

The sorceress nodded. “Once a cythraul leaves a host, they need a second bargain, but they can make one.”

“What is it?” Daindreth along with a ring of guards approached them. “Amira?”

“Your mother was here.” Amira glanced down to Cashun, her promise to the dead man still fresh on her lips. She meant to kill Vesha. Even if she had to go behind Daindreth’s back to do it. “This was one of her Kadra’han.” Amira fixed him in a hard stare, making sure she had his full attention when she said, “She ordered him to take on a cythraul.”

Daindreth swallowed and looked away. He studied the field of bodies around them. “There’s a town a few miles down the road. I’ve sent men to see if they’ve been attacked.”

Amira suspected that would be who had attacked the cythraul. She couldn’t blame them. At least if this many cythraul had been left without hosts, they’d been partially successful.

“So where is Vesha now?” Thadred rested his hands atop his cane. “Seems like she’s moving further inland. Closer to the capital?”

Amira shook her head. “Maybe.” She studied the body of Cashun. He’d been her age, if not younger. She knew

absolutely nothing about him, but he had given his life in service to a woman who had handed him a fate worse than death.

Just what horrors had he witnessed while controlled by a cythraul? Which of the atrocities had he been forced to watch as his own hands, his own body did the work of ravaging Thurston?

Amira didn't understand how she had been able to break her curse, but no one else seemed able to. Perhaps the only way to break a curse was to force it to break itself. Perhaps that was a unique set of conditions she'd stumbled into by sheer luck.

"What else could Vesha want?" Thadred asked, repeating the question that had haunted them all for days.

Amira looked back toward the trees. Vesha had nothing to gain by rampaging through the countryside. But the cythraul might. "I know we have discussed if Vesha herself might be possessed, but whether she is or not, I don't think she's in control."

Daindreth and Thadred both shot her looks.

Amira shrugged. "The empress I knew deserved to die, but she didn't have entire villages ripped apart because they refused to hand over clothes."

Daindreth didn't respond. He stared down at a nearby corpse—this one a boy of perhaps eight. The child had been stoned to death, if the rocks surrounding him were any indication. The bodies of several farmers lay fanned around him in a ghastly formation.

"We need to find her either way." Thadred exhaled, giving a sharp nod. "Tapios, can you and the rangers start tracking?"

The ranger squinted across the field. "This soil might be a challenge, but we should be able to find a trail."

"Keep soldiers with you," Daindreth ordered. "No one is to go anywhere in groups of less than five."

No one argued. Even the soldiers who would have to accompany the Istovari nodded their agreement.

In some strange way, the cythraul were good for these soldiers. Having a worse and much more present enemy than the Istovari helped them see the sorcerers as friends.

Amira rose, keeping her attention on her husband as the rangers scattered. “We don’t have time to deal with the bodies.” Strangely, she found she didn’t like it. She looked down at the remains of Cashun.

How many times had an unmarked grave very nearly been her own fate? Kadra’han were used up by their masters until they were thrown away like old wineskins. She and Thadred were the fortunate ones.

“We will pay the villagers to bury the other bodies,” Daindreth said. “We’ll leave a few soldiers at the village to protect it if the cythraul return.”

Amira looked to where the rangers led several dozen soldiers toward the treeline. They followed a smoking trail of corpses along the way, the cythraul who had caught on fire and not made it out. “Vesha’s still alive.”

Cashun’s curse wouldn’t have still been binding him if she wasn’t.

“I know.” Daindreth moved away and Amira followed him. They walked side by side across the field of carnage, past soldiers examining corpses and the remains of makeshift weapons.

Amira let Daindreth take it in. She let him see it, think on it. The death and destruction had to upset him even more than it did her.

“I want to outlaw Kadra’han,” Amira said, not sure where it came from. “I want to forbid the practice and order the release of those currently under compulsion.”

Daindreth nodded solemnly. “Yes. We will do that.”

Only the wealthiest people could afford Kadra'han, so there would be a fight. In truth, Amira wasn't sure that they would ever be able to eradicate the practice altogether. She was too skeptical of humanity for that, but she had to do something.

Vesha had abused the power over her Kadra'han. Amira's father had done the same, as had everyone else who had ever owned a Kadra'han's vows. Daindreth was the only exception she knew of, and he was an exceptional man to begin with.

"I don't know how I could have prevented this," Daindreth said, keeping his voice down.

"Let me kill Vesha." The words came out before Amira could stop them.

Amira would have willingly killed Vesha to put Daindreth on the throne months ago. He could have had her do that in Mynadra before Vesha had ever tried to have him possessed—ordered her to kill the empress. Amira would have happily done it and many people might still be alive.

Daindreth's shoulders sagged. He neither agreed nor disagreed. "I don't know what the right thing is, Amira. Not anymore."

"Sometimes the right thing isn't an option. Sometimes you must choose the least bad thing."

Daindreth looked around them, at the dozens of bodies of men, women, and some that were very much children. "No quarter. We send these things back to the Dread Marches."

Amira agreed with that easily enough. She noticed that he still said nothing about his mother.

Chapter Twelve

Vesha

The horde was scattered and Vesha didn't know who to blame. She and Odette stumbled through the forest with Caa Iss as a shadow.

Imps and greater cythraul followed them in a loose collection of shapes and forms. The creatures were more irritable, more annoyed. Those who had suffered burns grumbled and complained. Even though their bodies had now healed, many had lost clothes and their stolen baubles in the chaos. They'd wanted to go back, but Vesha had forbidden it. For once, Caa Iss had supported her decision.

Vesha wasn't sure what to do and she wasn't sure what to expect.

They still had a sizable collection of the creatures with them, but this was not the problem. Many now lacked hosts. Some had been forced to abandon their hosts after they'd realized their hosts would be killed. Several had tried fighting for too long and had been sent back to the Dread Marches.

Vesha didn't know where many of the creatures now were. It was impossible to say. Had they gone off into roving bands to attack shepherds and villages? Would they be accosting nearby travelers? Maybe, if she was lucky, they would start by hunting other bandits first. It did seem like the kind of sick irony the creatures would enjoy.

It began to rain. The first few drops pattered on the trees overhead. A few of the cythraul stuck out their tongues to drink in the raindrops.

Vesha began to wonder the last time she'd drunk water herself. Her throat was dry, and her tongue felt thick and heavy.

Odette clung to her side, barely making a sound for the past few hours. The girl's head had stopped bleeding, but she didn't

seem to be doing well. Vesha was afraid the girl might be permanently injured.

“We need to find shelter,” Vesha said. “It’s getting dark.”

“It is,” Caa Iss agreed in a mild tone.

“We need shelter.”

“We’re coming close to shelter.”

“What do you mean?”

Caa Iss nodded ahead. A wicked grin shaped the outline of his ghostly face. “There’s a manor house just ahead.”

Vesha’s stomach churned. She didn’t want to do this again. “No,” she whispered. “We don’t have the numbers for it.”

“That can be fixed,” Caa Iss mused. “If we convince a few of the servants to take cythraul, we can get some of my brothers and sisters back into bodies. It seems ideal.”

“No more!” Vesha screamed. As soon as she said it, pain shot through her god-eye, sharp and insistent. She could barely speak, barely breathe. Her head spun and she lost her balance, falling to her knees.

Odette collapsed beside her, unable to support herself. The girl groaned.

When Vesha recovered, Caa Iss leered over her with a smug grin. “You are not as in control as you think,” he murmured. “I am afraid my mother must be satisfied.”

“What does she want?” Vesha moaned, clutching at her face.

“She wants you to keep your end of the bargain, empress.”

Vesha shook her head. “Moreyne gave me her children to aid me, but you have been nothing but trouble!” Vesha whipped a glare on the nearby creatures.

Some shrank back, but others sniggered their amusement.

“You have not helped me at all. I could have gotten back to the mainland myself.”

“You need protection,” Caa Iss purred. “Surely you understand that.”

“I...” Vesha blinked, shaking her head.

“Your son may be a good son, but he’s a married man now. Married to your greatest enemy.”

Vesha rubbed her still aching forehead.

“Amira Brindonu is no doubt poisoning your son against you even as we speak, whispering what a threat you are in between her kisses and caresses.” Caa Iss licked a serpentine tongue over his lips. “I always had a feeling that one would be good in bed.”

“Where is Daindreth?” Vesha demanded. “We’ve seen no sign of soldiers. No sign of a hunt for me. Either my son is ignorant, too fearful, or too impotent to do anything.”

Caa Iss shrugged mildly.

“I could have walked to the well and kept my end of the bargain before this.” Vesha stood, shaky and unsteady on her feet. “You have been nothing but a curse.” She spun to include all the nearby cythraul in her words. “All of you!”

“As you say,” Caa Iss rumbled. “Your son is weak and ineffectual. But if you would trust the running of the empire to him, by all means, break off your agreement with my mother.”

“I don’t need you,” Vesha spat. “I can run this empire just fine.”

Caa Iss laughed. “You were barely clinging to this empire by a thread. Only after you took Saan Thii as your familiar did things change.” He folded his insubstantial arms across his chest, ghostly muscles rippling. “You have ruled well, Vesha. But you have always ruled with someone else to protect you. First your husband, then my mother.” He leaned down, looming over her like a mountain. “You are incapable of ruling on your own. Just as incapable and ineffective as your son.”

Vesha turned away, the old fear and sense of inadequacy rising within her. “No,” she whispered. “I did the right thing,

I...”

“You were an ambassador’s daughter,” Caa Iss sneered. “A nobody. Drystan only picked you as his wife because they told him he couldn’t.”

Vesha flinched at that despite her best efforts.

“You think there’s something special about you? There isn’t. You were never meant to be empress. Your own parents can’t stand you. Why do you think they never visited Mynadra? You were always a terrible mother, and you still are. You are a failure in every way and without us, you will never be anything else.”

Vesha trembled, stepping back.

Caa Iss bore down on her, broken wings raised above him, making him tower over her head. “Nothing,” he hissed. “You are *nothing*.”

Vesha turned away from the demon and looked to Odette. She’d barely known the girl before this whole incident. The girl had stayed with her out of fear or some misplaced loyalty, she wasn’t sure which. Either way, Odette had been beaten, injured, and most likely raped because of it.

The girl needed to rest, but they needed to keep moving. Even if Daindreth wasn’t chasing them, those farmers might. Nearby lords might.

Word was already spreading of the cythraul and their rampage. Those farmers were proof of that. Someone would fight back. Someone always did.

Vesha wasn’t sure if she wanted that to happen or not. She stared toward Odette as the girl crouched on the ground, holding her injured head.

“What happens if I die, demon?” Vesha demanded, turning back on Caa Iss. “You seem invested in keeping me alive. What happens if you can’t?”

Caa Iss shrugged. “You made a deal with my mother, so you belong to her now.”

“What if I break the deal?”

Caa Iss was suddenly real, suddenly solid. Vesha smelled the ashy, sooty stench of the Dread Marches and felt the rippling of his massive hulk. He grabbed Vesha around the throat and shoved her against the nearest tree. “You won’t,” he growled. “If you break your deal with Moreyne, a curse will descend. You think the floods, earthquakes, and famines of these past weeks have been bad? It will be nothing compared to Moreyne’s wrath and vengeance.”

Vesha gasped, writhing in his grip. Her vision blurred and she fought to claw him off. Her struggles had no effect.

“Caa Iss. Enough.”

Something grabbed Caa Iss by the shoulder and pulled him back. And just like that, Caa Iss was insubstantial again.

Vesha collapsed onto the forest floor, gasping and choking. Air rushed into her lungs and she focused on breathing, sucking in as deep as she could.

“Mother will be displeased if you damage the vessel.”

“Araa Oon,” Caa Iss purred. “Where have you been?”

The grave cythraul glanced down to Vesha. “Are you alright, empress?”

Vesha nodded, allowing Araa Oon to help her up.

“I was able to re-gather a few hundred of my brothers and sisters. I am not sure where the rest are,” he admitted. “They might have been forced back to the Dread Marches, but they might be seeking new hosts. They could also simply be lost.”

“We need food,” mewled a whining voice. “This body is cold. And wet.” One of the imps had taken the form of a large blacksmith which juxtaposed sharply to its high-pitched voice.

“Permission to take the manor house?” Araa Oon asked. “We may also find new hosts for some of our displaced brethren.”

“The Mirror is not far from here,” Caa Iss assured Vesha. “We should be able to reach it tomorrow, assuming we’re well rested.” Caa Iss licked his lips. “I do like the idea of resting in a manor tonight.”

Vesha exhaled a long breath. “No raping, no burning, no stealing, and no pillaging.”

Caa Iss rolled his eyes.

“No torturing, either.”

Araa Oon blinked at Vesha. He still had that strange way of blinking, like he was used to a second pair of eyelids. “I am not sure how we are to take the manor house without force, my lady. It is unlikely they will accommodate us willingly.”

Fear rose in her chest. “We’re almost there,” she whispered. “Almost there. I don’t want another slaughter. No more.”

Caa Iss was almost gentle as he sidled up to Vesha. He stroked her cheek with one claw, though it passed through her this time. “I know this is very difficult for you,” he said. “But as you pointed out, it’s almost over. This will be the last time.”

Vesha fought back tears. “These people have done nothing wrong.”

“Oh, everyone has done something wrong, Vesha, darling.” Caa Iss chuckled at that. “No one is innocent. Not really.”

“I can’t,” Vesha rasped. “No, please.”

Caa Iss looked down at Odette. She had barely moved from where she had collapsed.

“The girl’s brain is bleeding,” the demon said mildly. “She’ll be permanently addled, if she manages to survive. Unless...” Caa Iss cast Vesha a sideways glance. “I might be able to help.”

Vesha swallowed. “What would a cythraul know of healing?”

“We could have her possessed by one of us. Just long enough to heal her, you understand. She would be restored.”

Caa Iss raised his hairless brows. “You could save her.”

Vesha twisted her skirt in her hands. She couldn’t make a deal on behalf of another host, could she?

“I present to you a deal.” Caa Iss twitched his tail as he turned toward Odette. “One of us will possess her for as much time as it takes for her to be healed.”

“And in return?” Vesha braced herself. Cythraul never did things out of the goodness of their hearts.

“You will allow us to do whatever we want for as long as it takes for her to be healed.”

“How long will it take for her to be healed?” Vesha demanded.

Caa Iss chuckled. “But a moment.”

Vesha glanced to Araa Oon, but of course the Hunter’s face was unreadable. The Hunter didn’t seem to have any emotions at all as best Vesha could tell. She turned slowly to Caa Iss.

“Who will possess her?”

“I will,” hissed a voice over Vesha’s ear.

The empress spun around, heart racing.

A serpentine creature with patches of missing scales and a set of long, crouching legs loomed over Odette. “It shall take but a moment.” The creature looked to Caa Iss and made an expression that might have been a grin, but was hard to read. “Just a moment.”

Caa Iss smiled widely and Vesha had a sick feeling that she was missing something. “Are you ready?”

The watching cythraul grinned excitedly, looking on as Vesha turned back to the two of them.

“I can give you permission for this?”

“Yes,” Caa Iss confirmed. “She’s your servant and has placed herself under your authority.” He cocked his head to the side. “And she can hardly protest right now.”

Vesha gulped. Cythraul could lie. Cythraul could deceive. But they could not break their bargains, not without consequences. “Save my handmaiden,” Vesha commanded. “And I will allow you to do what you want for the time it takes to heal her.”

A look of excitement passed between the cythraul in earshot. The creatures chattered excitedly to each other.

“Get ready to run for the manor,” Caa Iss grinned.

Araa Oon snapped his head once in agreement. “Two miles straight ahead through the forest.”

The cythraul around them nodded, rubbing their hands together and grinning at one another.

Vesha felt she was missing something, but surely the creatures couldn’t run all of two miles in an instant, could they? She looked to Odette.

Odette deserved better than this. She was just a child who had happened to be in the wrong place at the wrong time.

Odette wasn’t even supposed to be here. By rank, Vesha’s lady in waiting, Duchess Kelsten should have come, but Kelsten was about to give birth to her second child. Odette had come in the duchess’s place.

Vesha looked up. “Heal her,” she commanded the snakelike cythraul. “But then get out.”

“With pleasure,” the creature purred. With a final look to Caa Iss and the others, the cythraul dove for Odette’s back. It plunged, disappearing like an eel into water.

Instantly, the other cythraul took off running. They charged faster than was humanly possible, but still not fast enough to cover the distance to the manor in less than several minutes.

Vesha knelt before her handmaiden. “Odette?”

“Hmm.” Bright yellow eyes looked out from Odette’s face. “I forgot what female bodies felt like. Odd.”

“How much longer?” She watched as Odette’s skin mended before her eyes. Cuts and scratches healed, bruises faded, and the deathly pallor of the girl’s skin became a healthy rose color.

“Oh my. I didn’t realize I’d done this much damage to her.”

Vesha didn’t want to hear it. “Are you done?” She could hear the other cythraul tearing away into the forest. Their shouts and cries of excitement rang through the trees.

Her heart beat faster. They still wouldn’t be able to reach the manor before Odette was healed, but...

“Aren’t you going to ask what I mean?” The cythraul inhabiting Odette cast Vesha a coy look.

“No. Now just finish healing her and get out.”

“Oh, but she’s extensively damaged. More than you can see, too. Would you like to know what we did after you said we could play with her?”

Vesha raised her hand to slap the creature, then remembered it was inside Odette’s body.

“Six of us had her.” The demon smiled using Odette’s face. “We were bored. More of us wanted to, of course, but Araa Oon ruined the fun. Said you hadn’t given permission for us to swyve your favorite servant to death.”

“Odette looks fine to me,” Vesha growled. “Now let her go.”

The creature rolled its orange eyes and then slithered out Odette’s mouth.

The girl exhaled, coughing and gagging as she fell forward.

Vesha caught her. “Odette? Child, are you well?”

“My lady?” Odette looked up to her with wide eyes.

Vesha touched the girl’s temple, where the gash and bruise had been. “Are you alright?”

“Yes, my lady. Yes, I think so.” Odette looked around. “What...?”

Vesha released the girl and sprang to her feet. “Stop!” she shouted into the forest. “Odette is healed!” she cried into the forest. “Your time is up!”

The laughs and shouts and sound of rushing footsteps continued.

“I said—!” She spun on Caa Iss. “The deal was that they could only do what they wanted until she was healed!”

“Yes,” Caa Iss purred back. “But as they are already some distance into the trees, they have no way of knowing when she’s healed, do they?”

“Come back!” Vesha screamed at the top of her lungs. She cast about for Araa Oon, but it seemed he had raced ahead with the others.

“I don’t think they can hear you,” Caa Iss muttered.

Vesha spun on the serpentine cythraul who had healed Odette. “You will go to them as fast as you can and tell them their time is up. Go!”

The serpentine cythraul slithered away, floating through the air like a swimming creature.

Vesha looked to Odette. “Are you alright, girl?”

“Yes,” the handmaiden answered, rubbing her arms. She looked at her wrists, pushing up her sleeves. The bruises were gone. “I’m...I’m not hurt.”

Vesha grabbed her arm. There wasn’t time. “Wonderful. Now we need to catch up with them and stop them before—”

Screams echoed through the trees.

Vesha’s heart leapt into her throat. “No.”

Odette shrank back. “Oh no.”

“I have to stop them.” Vesha spun on Caa Iss. “You are to order them to stop!”

Caa Iss shrugged. “It would be unwise to leave my witch alone in a strange forest.”

With a cry, Vesha plunged into the forest. She lifted the tattered remains of her skirt, tearing into the trees. Briars and vines grabbed at her and branches stabbed her arms and face.

Odette came running after her, close on her heels. “My empress!”

Vesha tripped over something on the forest floor and fell. She smacked her face on a branch going down and tasted blood.

“Careful!” Odette tried to help her up.

Caa Iss chuckled at their backs, unbearably smug even now. He was far worse than her first familiar. Far worse. She hated him with every fiber in her body.

Indistinct shouts rose from ahead. A child’s voice, a man’s. Dogs barked. And, above it all, laughter.

That sickening, horrible laughter. It rose from dozens of cythraul voices, so far ahead, yet so clear.

Scrambling back to her feet, Vesha clawed her way through the undergrowth. She’d never had to tear through the forest as she did now. She’d only experienced the forest from horseback or inside a carriage or along garden paths.

How Vesha wished she could move faster. How she wished that she was just a little more fit. Vesha had never been an athletic girl. That had been Zeyna.

It occurred to her then that Zeyna could have gotten through these trees much faster. Her sister would have probably been there by now.

The smell of smoke met Vesha’s nostrils.

Vesha slipped on a damp patch of earth. Skidding on leaves and trampled vines, she hit the ground. Sobbing, she clawed her way forward, smeared in mud and leaves and blood from her scratches.

“Stop!” Vesha screamed. “Stop, please!” Her voice broke and she choked. Fighting to get back on her feet, Vesha tore onward.

At her back, Odette had begun crying. The girl’s gentle sobs rose in a soft echo to Vesha’s own.

All the while, screams came from ahead and Caa Iss’s chuckles rose from behind. The demon found amusement in all suffering that wasn’t his.

Vesha’s muscles shook, and her aching body throbbed. She crawled out of the trees, breaking out under a manicured row of hedges. Vesha stumbled free to find a small manor house already on fire.

“My lady!” Odette grabbed her and dragged her back as horses galloped madly in front of them. Broken halters flapped around the animals’ heads and blood stained their flanks.

A dead terrier lay sprawled across the grass, its head snapped back at a sharp angle. Not far away laid the corpse of a boy with a bloody ruin for a throat.

Had the dog tried to protect his young master?

The boy couldn’t have been more than ten—he still wore shorts. His brass buttons were embossed with the shape of little dogs.

Vesha thought she might be sick.

Odette let off a cry of anguish and turned her face away.

The manor had a small stable and that too was on fire. Stables were full of hay and straw. Both burned frighteningly well.

Chickens and geese scattered in all directions. Several cows with udders swinging wildly loped after the horses.

Cythraul chased the chickens, grinning madly. One of them caught a chicken and crushed it with a mighty blow. The bird screamed and cawed in pain and the cythraul laughed

maniacally as something cracked and the bird's body smashed, cracking and breaking apart while the hen still screamed.

“Stop!” Vesha ordered. “Stop this at once!”

The offended cythraul stopped. The dying chicken lay on the ground, wings still beating and legs pedaling in vain.

Vesha wanted to vomit. Screams at her back reminded her she didn't have time. She spun away from the gory cruelty before her and ran toward the manor house—but she was too late.

Chapter Thirteen

Amira

Cythraul left a trail of destruction in their wake. It made them easy to track.

Either the creatures were incapable of discipline in the most basic sense, or they didn't care if they were found.

Perhaps they wanted to be found. What did they have to lose, after all? Then again, they could be killed.

A few farmers from the massacre had been found huddled in the nearby village. They had confirmed some of the cythraul had been killed, or at least their bodies had been.

At least a few of them would have been sent back to the Dread Marches. That several cythraul had preemptively abandoned their bodies—as the one infecting Cashun had done—indicated that Vesha didn't have free reign to release cythraul from the Dread Marches at will.

But no one knew how many cythraul had actually been freed. Cashun hadn't had the time to say and there had been no other survivors.

It rained for most of the night, forcing the army to stop. They made camp several miles from the site of the cythraul massacre.

Amira and Daindreth lay quietly inside their tent, fully clothed. Daindreth stroked her back as she rested her head on his chest. She clung tight to him, reassuring herself with every rise and fall of his chest that he was alive.

Amira had killed many men and it always unsettled her how bodies changed after death. They became deflated, empty. Death became obvious even before they began to rot.

And bodies *changed* so easily.

She imagined that if she just held on tightly enough, she could keep the life in Daindreth forever. That she could hold

onto him in this moment and keep them both here—with the steady rise and fall of his breathing and his heart thumping against her ear.

“I’m afraid to sleep,” Amira whispered. “I’m afraid of nightmares.”

“Me too,” Daindreth whispered.

“You have nightmares?” Amira supposed everyone had nightmares. “Still?”

Daindreth had once told her that while sharing his body with the cythraul, Caa Iss had visited him in his dreams. It had been the only time they had interacted face to face.

“Yes,” Daindreth admitted. “Sometimes.”

“Different ones?” Amira asked softly. “Or the same?”

“Usually different ones, with the same story.” Daindreth’s chest rose and fell in a long exhale. “I dream of hurting people—usually people I love.” His hand flattened on her back. “And I want to stop, but I can’t.”

Outside the tent, the *ka* of pacing soldiers told her their guards were on high alert. Not far away, she could sense Sair in her tent and a figure with a band of *ka* around his neck that must be Thadred.

“You’d never hurt me, Daindreth.” Amira stroked his chest. “You’d never hurt anyone.”

“I don’t want to,” Daindreth said. “That’s the point of the nightmares.”

Amira propped herself up on her elbow so she could lean over him. His face was unreadable in the dark, but she traced the shape of his lips. “Those dreams are lies.”

Daindreth’s lips parted, and she stroked the shape of his mouth. “And you? What happens in your nightmares, my love?”

Amira settled beside him, curling back into the crook of his arm. “I dream of failing.” She listened to the steady rise and

fall of his breathing, assuring herself that he still breathed, that there was still life in him. “I no longer dream of my mother. The Tower.”

“That’s good,” Daindreth said.

Amira shrugged one shoulder. “I dream of standing over you, Fonra, Thadred, even my mother and father sometimes. I see you all die in front of me, one by one. Then I’m alone. With this...aching emptiness.”

Daindreth kissed the top of her head. “If I die first,” he trailed his fingers along her cheek, “then I will return to haunt you.” He fingered the back of her shirt, pinching the fabric. “I shall be your devoted specter, clinging to you like a second shadow.”

Amira whimpered, pressing her face against his chest. “Don’t let me live without you.”

“I don’t plan to, love.” Daindreth covered her hand in his, pressing it against his heart.

Amira sniffled, her eyes stinging.

Daindreth kissed the top of her head. “But if anything happens to me...”

“No,” Amira snapped. She was unwilling to consider the possibility. Surely if it came to that, it would only be because she had died protecting him.

“If anything happens to me, I have named you as my heir.” Daindreth cleared his throat. “I had my lawyers draft and finalize the documents. Cromwell also signed them.”

Amira knotted her hand into the front of his shirt, twisting the fabric in her fist. “I won’t let anything happen to you.”

“But if it does...” Daindreth’s tone was gentle, cajoling. “If anything happens to me, promise that you will look after the empire?”

“Why?” Amira demanded. “I am unfit to rule. I would burn this continent down in an instant if that was the cost of saving

you.”

“I am the empire,” Daindreth answered patiently. “And you may be impetuous and short-tempered, but you’re clever. You know how to listen to advisors and, more importantly, you know how to choose them.”

Amira muttered under her breath, flopping against Daindreth again. “You’re not dying. I won’t allow it. We’ve been over this.”

Daindreth chuckled softly. “I have faith in you.”

Whether Daindreth meant that as faith she would keep them both alive, or that she would survive him, she wasn’t sure. Amira pressed herself closer against him, determined to cling to this moment for as long as she could.

She fell asleep with her hand knotted in his shirt.



Overnight, a patrol caught a runaway horse with claw marks and blood on its flanks. The animal had been otherwise unharmed, but it had been nearly ready to collapse with exhaustion. It must have run for miles out of sheer terror.

Their scouts located the ravaged manor house in the afternoon. The stables had been burned down, but the manor had only been partially scorched, thanks to last night’s rain.

Amira rode her little rouncey up to the manor house with guards all around. The estate had already been secured, the soldiers making sure there were no signs of any straggling attackers.

But this had been the work of cythraul.

“It appears that this was the Monford Estate, my liege,” said Westfall as he gave his report to Daindreth. “It belonged to a minor landowner in the fief. We’re not sure if they knew

of the cythraul raiding party, but they seem to have been unprepared for it, either way.”

Amira watched her husband as he remained stone-faced and straight in his saddle though she could tell he was pained. He sat stiff and erect, looking over the ruins of the estate.

“No survivors?” Daindreth asked quietly.

“None that we can tell, my liege.” Westfall’s cool collection dropped for a moment. “There...we’ve accounted for several of the family members and a few of the staff. But we have no way of knowing if anyone is missing.”

Amira grimaced. “Anyone who looks to be a stranger?”

“We haven’t searched the bodies thoroughly. But it doesn’t appear they put up much of a fight,” Westfall answered. “There’s no sign anyone here was even armed.”

“Why were they out here alone when there’s a band of raiders ravaging the countryside?” Amira glanced around at the ruined manor.

It was just that—a country estate. There were no walls to protect it, just thick hedges circling the outside of the grounds. This place was an artifact of peacetime, a cruelly ironic testament to just how well Vesha had ensured peace.

“We’re a few miles off the main road,” Westfall said. “People off the main routes don’t often need to take as many precautions.”

It was a shame the people of this estate hadn’t been as preemptive as the farmers who had worked that burned field. The careful planning of those farmers had cost nearly all of them their lives, but their families had been spared. Despite only a couple hundred or so hosts being slain, the cythraul had scattered before they could raid that village.

The farmers of that village had taken the threat seriously. This estate had not.

Or maybe this estate hadn’t even known about the fate of Thurston. They seemed isolated.

Or perhaps they had just thought that they would be safe here as they always had been. It wasn't unheard of for people to ignore warnings. For every person who jumped at shadows and fled from rumors, there was another person who would refuse to acknowledge danger even as it was standing over them with slavering jaws.

Whatever the reason, these people were dead now.

Amira dismounted her little bay mare. "I'm going to search the grounds."

"Be careful," Daindreth said.

"I will." Amira touched his knee as she passed before she marched toward the ruined manor.

A quad of guards fell in around her. Their armor squeaked a little thanks to the rain.

Amira took them toward the manor. Soldiers examined the bodies, covering them with burlap and canvas. A heaviness had come over the men, a silence. Many probably had thought they were chasing shadows, but it was hard to deny the stories now.

Ka shimmered over the corpses, but it was the *ka* of decay.

Amira reached the bodies in the yard. She knelt, reaching for the canvas over the nearest one.

"Your Grace," one of the soldiers cautioned, "you might not ___"

Underneath was a young woman—or what had been one. Her corpse was stripped naked and bloody. Her mouth was open in a final scream and her eyes had been clawed out.

Amira forced herself not to react, not to flinch away. The girl's breasts had been ripped, marked by teeth and shredded by nails. Arm shaking, Amira lowered the canvas back over the corpse.

That would have been her own fate if Caa Iss had his way. She knew that. Captain Darrigan's sacrifice, and a bit of pure

chance was all that had saved her from ending up this way herself.

Amira moved onto the next body. It was an older man, thick in the middle and skinny through the arms and legs. He had been treated much the same way. His clothes lay in bloody tatters on the ground. His eyes had also been clawed out and his body had dozens of bite marks from what looked like human teeth.

“They bit off his manhood, my lady,” one of the soldiers said, voice shaking.

Amira glanced to where another piece of burlap had been laid over the grass several steps away. She lowered the canvas back over the corpse, grimacing.

Inside the kitchen was a charnel house. Amira found an old woman who had also been stripped and pieces of her sheared off with kitchen knives. Blood covered the whole kitchen and a girl who couldn't have been more than ten lay beside her, likewise mutilated.

“What did they want?” the young sergeant asked. “It doesn't make sense.”

Amira swallowed, forcing herself to keep breathing despite the stench of blood. “They're demons,” she answered quietly. “They don't have to make sense.” She looked up. “Part of this house was burned?”

“Yes. The rain last night seems to have put it out.”

Amira glanced around her, seeking the telltale *ka* that gave away living things. Cythraul were easy to spot. Most living things blended together but their life force was a beacon to any sorceress close enough to sense them.

The soldiers around her were a steady glow, constant and predictable. They were expected. Beyond the manor house, Amira could feel the other men pacing the grounds, searching.

But there was life inside the house still. Amira could sense it.

The assassin took a deep breath. “You’ve searched the house?”

“We are still seeing to that.” The sergeant inclined his head respectfully.

Amira glanced up. “There’s someone here.” She cocked her head to one side. “Upstairs. Are any of your men searching up there?”

The sergeant glanced around, taking a brief headcount. “No, Your Grace.”

That was all Amira needed to hear. She drew her dagger, holding it loosely in one hand. “This way.”

The manor had been ransacked. Blood splattered across the walls and into the hallways.

Bloody footprints tracked from the kitchen into the rest of the house. Amira noticed that the tracks were barefoot, just like the bodies of the slain cythraul had been.

She ventured carefully, conscious of the living energies in her surroundings. Besides the huddled form upstairs, she didn’t sense anything unexpected.

Amira and the soldiers crossed through an empty sitting room with smashed windows and ripped cushions. The remains of a midday meal lay scattered on the floor.

“Were they looking for something?” One of the soldiers spoke up quietly.

“Maybe.” Amira wouldn’t say for certain that the monsters hadn’t been, but it seemed more likely that these creatures had ransacked the manor for the fun of it. They were hardly rational beings. “This way.”

Amira led the soldiers through the smoldering remains of a drawing room and a foyer. The stairwell was mostly intact, though some of the bannisters had been smashed.

Blood had been tracked through the whole house, as if dozens of feet had rushed in every direction. In some places,

the mud mixed with dirt and ash. Everything had been tainted by filth and gore.

Amira ventured up the stairs. They hadn't been too badly damaged by the fire, though some of the roof overhead had been destroyed.

The smell of damp stone mixed with the smell of ash and blood. It pervaded everything and Amira doubted that the smell could ever be washed out.

Amira reached the upper story of the manor. There were perhaps a dozen rooms up top. It wasn't an excessive number, but this would be considered a modest and respectable house for most gentry. Cromwell had a house about this size in Lashera.

"There's something alive up here," Amira said to the sergeant.

The young man had remained close at her side. He glanced to the other soldiers. "Perhaps I should go first, my empress."

"Stay behind me." Amira kept her dagger out and approached the third door to the right. She felt carefully at the *ka* within each room. There was enough power to indicate another body or two might be rotting in one of the bedrooms, but the source of living *ka* led her straight ahead.

Amira pushed the door open. Inside was a lady's room judging by the collection of rouges and kohl beside the small vanity. The windows had been shoved open, massive curtains to one side.

Behind the curtains, she sensed the source of the *ka*. A human figure standing upright.

"Come out," Amira ordered. "Show yourself."

Silence.

"I know you're there," Amira said flatly. "Now show yourself before I have to force you."

The curtains rippled a little, but it might have been a trick of the wind. The soldiers looked at each other.

Amira wasn't playing games. Something or someone was behind that curtain, and she wasn't risking her life or the lives of the soldiers. "Sergeant, hand me your spear."

"No, please!" cried a female voice.

The soldiers jumped, lowering their spears. A young woman stumbled out from behind the curtains.

"Please," the young woman begged. "Please, I didn't...I just...I'm sorry. Please." The girl was around Amira's age and looked like she had been dragged through the forest by her hair.

Her dress had once been worthy for a lady of the court, but it had since been torn, hastily repaired, and stained a dozen times over.

"Who are you?" Amira noticed that the girl wore shoes, but she wasn't yet certain if that meant anything or not.

The girl was filthy, covered in what might be dirt or might be dried blood. It matted her hair and marked her clothes. "Please," the girl whispered. "My name is Odette Eyden. I am lady's maid to Empress Vesha."

Several of the soldiers made surprised sounds.

Amira schooled her face into neutrality. "Lady's maid?" Amira glanced around the empty room. "Where is your lady, Odette?"

Odette swallowed, hands clenched before her. She looked past Amira to the soldiers, then back to Amira. "You...do I know you?"

Amira said nothing. If this truly was Vesha's servant, it was possible. Amira didn't remember every person she had encountered in Mynadra. "Where is Vesha?" Amira raised her dagger just a little. "There was a massacre here, Odette. And you are the only one who was spared. What do you have to say to that?"

Any semblance of composure fled. Odette looked away, hands over her mouth. “They...there are...the monsters.”

“What monsters?” Amira forced herself not to ask about cythraul. She didn’t want to put that word into the girl’s mouth.

“They’re...” Odette looked out the window to where the soldiers carrying the imperial banner were in plain sight. “You’re imperial soldiers.” Odette turned around, eyes wide. “Listen to me. The empress needs help.”

“I am the empress,” Amira said, unable to keep some venom from her tone. “Perhaps you mean Vesha?”

Odette’s eyes widened. She looked from Amira back to the soldiers. “Please. She’s in trouble.”

“Yes, I imagine she is.”

They had already known Vesha was behind this, but to hear it confirmed only kindled Amira’s wrath. All of this was Vesha’s fault. Vesha had made it clear she would do anything for the greater good, even permit wholesale slaughter, torture, and mutilation of innocent people.

Vesha was guilty a thousand times over and there were not enough gallows in existence to make her pay for these crimes.

“Take this woman into custody,” Amira ordered. “And search her for weapons.”

“Your Grace.” The young sergeant grimaced. He leaned over to speak in Amira’s ear. “The girl looks like she’s been through a great deal.”

“The murdered people downstairs went through a great deal,” Amira snapped back. “She just confessed to being a servant of the usurper. Take her into custody.”

“Empress?” the young woman repeated. It took a moment and then understanding dawned on her. “You’re Amira Brindonu. Archduke Daindreth’s sorceress.”

“I am Daindreth’s empress,” Amira shot back. “Emperor Daindreth.”

Two of the soldiers stepped forward.

Odette shrank back. “No, please,” she whimpered. “I’ll do what you want. Please.” She held her hands up.

The soldiers glanced at each other, uncomfortable.

Amira wondered if they would have been so uncomfortable if it had been Thadred ordering them to do this. “Keep your hands in plain sight.” She looked to the two guards. “Watch her. If you’re uncomfortable searching her, know it’s your own faults if she stabs either of you.”

Amira planned to have the girl questioned long and thoroughly.

“You’re after the empress?”

“We’re after Vesha the Usurper,” Amira retorted. “The woman responsible for the Sack of Iandua, the destruction of Thurston, the murder of countless innocent farmers at the Palten Fields, and the slaughter of everyone in this estate here.”

Odette’s wide eyes looked from Amira to the soldiers, as if she was looking to them for assurance that this was a jest.

“Bring her out.” Amira didn’t want to question the girl here.

Chapter Fourteen

Vesha

Leaving Odette behind in the burned out ruins of the ravaged manor had been a hard decision, but one that had to be made. The girl had been forced to endure and witness atrocities that no human should be forced to imagine, much less see. It was only a matter of time before the girl had ended up dead.

Vesha walked with Caa Iss trailing after her. They marched through the forest under the light of a full moon. The horde shuffled around them.

It was dark, but cythraul could see in the dark. And with her god-eye, so could Vesha. She kept moving.

The sooner they reached the Mirror, the sooner they would unleash Moreyne. The sooner they unleashed Moreyne, the sooner the cythraul would be the goddess's problem once again. Vesha ached more than anything for that.

"Caa Iss." Vesha didn't look up as she crawled over a fallen log.

"My witch?" The way Caa Iss spoke the title, it might have been a show of respect or ownership. It was always hard to tell with cythraul.

"Moreyne needs a body to enter this world, doesn't she?" The thought had been nagging at the back of her mind for several days now, in moments of lucidity between when her head ached or she simply blacked out.

"Yes," Caa Iss answered slowly, dragging the words out. "Yes, she does."

Vesha scrambled under a branch, the leaves and twigs scratching at her back. "Me?"

Caa Iss was silent for a long moment. "The bargain doesn't specify."

Vesha sighed. She'd been right to leave Odette behind. She didn't want the temptation of handing over the girl in her own stead. "Can your mother kill me first?"

Caa Iss snorted. "We can't inhabit dead bodies. You know this."

Vesha swallowed. "Can she put me to sleep, then?" Vesha wasn't sure what she was trying to say. "Drive me mad? Anything?"

Caa Iss chuckled. "You'd prefer madness?"

Vesha felt she was already in a world of madness. Perhaps if she was mad herself, it wouldn't be so horrific. Perhaps then it would be bearable.

"I don't know," Vesha admitted. "I just..." A deep, cloying exhaustion bore down on her.

When Daindreth was born, Vesha had labored for the better part of a day before the midwives laid him in her arms. She had been more tired than she had known she could be, but even that had been different. There had been triumph in that. A kind of glory. She'd given Drystan an heir.

Now, Vesha didn't see how she could win. The cythraul were going to protect the empire, that was the bargain. But at what cost? Might the price of victory be so high that it was the same as defeat?

Vesha reminded herself this was just temporary. Once Moreyne was free, she would keep the creatures under control and restore order.

She had to.

Vesha felt a branch stab through the sleeve of her dress but kept walking. "How much farther to the Mirror?"

Caa Iss sniffed at the air. "Not far. We should reach it in a day or two."

"A day or two?"

Caa Iss made a rumbling sound that might have been a grunt.

“My son is chasing us,” Vesha said. “If those farmers have heard of us, then my son certainly has.”

“And the Istovari sorceress,” Caa Iss agreed.

“He’s calling himself emperor now. He’ll be expected to fix this.”

“Mmm.” Caa Iss sounded like he was smiling. “I hope so.”

“What do you mean?”

“It will be efficient, don’t you think? If your only rival for rule of the empire shows himself before my mother?”

Vesha tried not to think about what that meant, but she couldn’t put it off. “What do you mean?”

“I am just saying. Daindreth’s delusions of honor and duty are exceptional. We both know this.”

Vesha had lived in a constant state of horror and dread for weeks now. Yet she found that she felt just a little more. “I don’t want my son harmed.”

“His wife will try to kill you,” Caa Iss rumbled. “We both know this.”

Vesha swallowed. Yes, she anticipated the Istovari girl’s wrath. “I can’t do anything about that.”

“There can only be one ruler of an empire,” Caa Iss said. “You have given rule to Moreyne.”

Vesha stopped, one hand resting on a stone in front of her. In the darkness of the trees, the shapes of cythraul continued on, their red eyes marking where the creatures moved. She turned to face the ghostly shape of Caa Iss. “Not my son.”

Caa Iss’s head cocked to the side. “You were willing to hand him off to me.”

“That was different.”

“Was it? He tried to choose death over that fate. From his perspective, I imagine this would actually be better.”

Vesha shook her head, turning away. Everything she had ever done, she had done for the empire, for Drystan. For the greater good.

“Would you like to go back on your deal?” Caa Iss purred, leaning closer. “If you refuse this bargain, I can’t make any guarantees of what my brothers and sisters might do to you.” He grinned, glancing to the trees. Several sets of red eyes had stopped moving and watched them.

A shiver of pain went through the god-eye in Vesha’s face, a ripple of heat. It was not quite the stabbing headache she usually felt, but it seemed a warning.

“What if I rescind my offer for your kind to roam free?” Vesha clipped. “What then?”

Caa Iss shrugged. “We already kept our end. We saw you safely back to your empire.”

Vesha glanced around at the red eyes encircling her from the dark. The eyes surrounded her like a malicious constellation, hungry and ravenous.

Vesha had seen many times what these creatures did to people they saw as disposable. She shuddered to think what they would do to her if she became their enemy.

Still.

Vesha touched at the edges of the god-eye.

Moreyne was not desperate. She wanted freedom, yes. She had writhed for millennia inside her prison. But she was not desperate. Even after thousands of years in the Dread Marches, she was proud. She remembered that she was a goddess. She remembered that she had once co-ruled the skies. She would not beg, and she would not panic if this feeble mortal went back on her word.

Vesha looked back up to Caa Iss. “I could break my bargain with you. Just you.” She tilted her head to the side. “I’ve seen

no evidence that having you as my familiar has brought any benefit to the empire.”

“I have advised you,” Caa Iss said flatly.

“But you have no power.”

“I told you. I am trapped between states of being.”

“Yes, yes.” Vesha waved her hand dismissively. “But so far, you have done nothing that you promised me. You have not protected my empire, only burned, murdered, raped, and pillaged across it.” Vesha turned, looking at the demons around her. “All of you!”

The creatures stirred, watching Vesha steadily. Unblinking.

“I’ve always wondered—who enforces the laws of cythraul? What power forces you to obey the contracts you make?”

For the first time, Caa Iss shifted, breaking eye contact.

“There is a power that does, isn’t there?” Vesha leaned toward him. “What if I am not the one who has broken my contract? What if—”

Pain shot through Vesha’s entire skull. In a single instant, it felt as if a dagger had been driven straight into the god-eye. She cried out, grasping at her head.

The pain was so intense, she was sure a blade stuck out of her face, but she couldn’t feel anything.

Vesha doubled over as the pain spread through her entire head, taking over her thoughts and words. The pain consumed everything, blinding her to all else.

When Vesha came to, she was lying in the mud with Caa Iss leaning over her. Her entire head ached, and she couldn’t remember why.

She’d been arguing with Caa Iss. That had been part of it. She was angry at him, but that was hardly new.

“What happened?” Vesha rasped, her voice hoarse as if she had screamed just now.

“Come, my witch,” Caa Iss crooned. “We have a long way to go yet.”

Vesha wanted to curse at him. She wanted to tell him she hated him, and he could go straight back to the Dread Marches and his mother.

But instead, she found herself crawling to her feet.

Mud caked her hands and fresh bruises marked her body. But Vesha crawled on through the forest with the cythraul horde around her, their red eyes bobbing along between the trees.

Chapter Fifteen

Thadred

It was one thing to interrogate assassins, enemy Kadra'han, and whiny monks. It was quite another to interrogate handmaidens who looked like they'd been dragged through the very Dread Marches themselves.

Thadred sat on a trunk inside Sair's tent, hands folded atop his cane. How was he supposed to start?

Sair crouched beside the girl, offering her a cup of mulled wine. The girl's face was red and swollen, like she'd done nothing but cry these past days.

Amira seemed to think the girl was in league with Vesha. To be fair, by the girl's own admission, she was.

And to her credit, Amira had been willing to let Thadred and Sair take over dealing with her while she kept searching the manor for signs of cythraul.

Thadred almost hoped Amira would find one. That woman was spoiling for a fight and maybe taking her frustrations out on a demon would help her unwind.

Sair had helped Odette get cleaned up. They'd washed most of the mud and blood off her and gotten her a new dress. It was one of Sair's—simple linen of Istovari make. The sleeves were too long and had been rolled up several times.

Odette crouched low, like she was trying not to be seen. Her face said she might cry again at any moment.

Thadred hated when people cried during interrogation. It made him feel like a prick.

Sair knelt in front of Odette, not touching her, but in that comforting, motherly way she was so good at. "Odette, please repeat to Lord Thadred what you said to me."

Odette studied the mulled wine in her lap, breathing in the steam. "I don't...I don't want to betray Her Majesty."

Good thing Amira wasn't here to hear that.

"You're not," Sair assured gently. "The emperor wants to help his mother." That much was true. "She's in trouble, Odette. I think you know that, but we need to find her if we're going to stop the horde and save her."

Odette took a deep breath. "I went with the empress to Kelamora as one of her attendants."

Thadred raised his brows. Interesting. So the girl had been there the night Caa Iss had been torn out of Daindreth.

"We were packed up in the middle of the night and told to be ready on the barges, just in case. The empress and her Kadra'han came running from the monastery later that night."

Thadred nodded. It sounded like Captain Darrigan had planned well for the empress's escape. The poor man had wanted to keep her safe and alive, but it seemed Vesha had other ideas.

"We sailed to the port city at the mouth of the river. I'm not sure of the name?"

Sair smiled encouragingly. "That's alright. What happened next?"

"We sailed to Iandua."

Thadred tried not to show anything. Iandua—where his own mother and Vesha's sister lived, also the city that had been sacked by cythraul.

"And what happened there?"

Odette recounted a story of the empress visiting her sister—his mother. Thadred bit his tongue. He didn't care about his mother, he reminded himself. She'd left him. He'd never known her.

"The empress had us take her to a...a house of pleasure," Odette said. "In the red quarter."

"A brothel?" Thadred's brows rose. Hardly the place he would have looked for the former empress.

There were rumors, of course, that Vesha held orgies involving beautiful foreigners and highly imaginative erotic practices. But those were the sorts of rumors that usually arose around women—particularly rich and powerful ones.

Furthermore, Thadred had never met anyone who had attended these alleged orgies. If they ever turned out to be real, he'd be most scandalized over never being invited.

Odette flushed. "Yes." She looked down to her hands again. "She...entered the well there."

Thadred blinked. "The well?" He thought he'd known all the euphemisms involving brothels, but this was a new one. "What do you mean?"

"There was a well in the courtyard. And she disappeared into it."

Thadred blinked. "You mean an actual well?"

"Yes," Odette answered, shaking.

"A literal well?"

Sair shook her head at him. "What other kind of well is there?"

Thadred had been coming up with several explanations, but it seemed this wasn't a euphemism. "She climbed down a well?"

"She disappeared into it, yes."

Thadred tried not to show anything.

"She was gone for two days," Odette said. "We didn't know where she went. We waited. Her sister returned home after the first few hours, but we kept vigil." Odette adjusted her grip around her cup. "She told us that if she wasn't back in two days, we were to find the archduke. And her Kadra'han were to serve him."

Thadred's brows rose at that. A little surprising. If that was true, it must mean Vesha had seen her death on that expedition

as a genuine possibility. “Where did she go when she went down the well?”

Odette ducked her head. “I...I am not sure how to explain it, sir.”

Thadred grimaced. “Were there catacombs under Iandua or something?”

It took several more pointed questions from Sair and Thadred, but the girl eventually admitted that Vesha had gone into the Dread Marches.

“I didn’t think it was possible,” Odette admitted. “But she did. When she came back...” Odette swallowed and her eyes glazed over. Her knuckles went white around the cup. “She brought the monsters with her.”

Thadred forced himself to smile. Vesha had brought cythraul with her, had she? On purpose? Stupid bitch.

Thadred had only secondhand experience with the creatures and even he knew better. Why did this woman think she could control the scions of a fallen goddess? How arrogant did she have to be?

Odette began to cry. Sair soothed her, rubbing her arms and speaking softly. Between tears, Odette told them a story that fit with the fragments they’d gotten from reports, survivor accounts, and the dying Kadra’han yesterday. Vesha had ordered her Kadra’han to take cythraul. The city had been ravaged, those who had survived the creatures fled into the surrounding countryside.

Odette said their ships ran aground off the coast. It sounded, from Odette’s version, that hadn’t been intentional. Vesha had been agitated and angry about it.

There were multiple leaders of the cythraul. One was Caa Iss. Another was called Araa Oon.

Thadred listened to the girl’s story. It raised more questions than answers.

She claimed that Vesha was not herself at times. When pressed what that meant, Odette simply said that she did things that she would never have done normally.

When asked about Thurston, she didn't know the name of the town. But when asked if the horde had encountered any people, she mentioned a farmhouse and a town, then burst into tears.

Sair put her arms around the girl, speaking softly. She looked to Thadred and looked to the tent exit. He took the hint and stepped outside. He wasn't sure when he had been made chief inquisitor, but it was a tiresome job.

Most the tents hadn't been set up. Soldiers were being tasked with wrapping the corpses of the dead in bedsheets and curtains—whatever they could find. The local baron had been informed and it would be his duty to notify the families and relatives of the dead.

Thadred wanted to stay close to Sair's tent just in case she needed him again. She was more than capable, and it was unlikely, but if the girl suddenly turned into a cythraul, he wanted to be near. He circled the tent at a modest distance, leaning on his cane for balance. He could compensate for his injury with spells now, but it had been a long day, and he was tired. Magic took effort, after all.

Even if he could sense the *ka* around him more and more. Since Sair had taken his ring and awakened his magic in the Cursewood, he had been growing stronger.

He didn't think he would ever be as strong as Amira and her torrents of power, but he was strong enough to be dangerous now.

Daindreth approached him, Westfall and several soldiers in his wake. "Lord Thadred."

"Your Majesty." Thadred inclined his head since they were in public. Some decorum needed to be observed for the sake of witnesses.

"Where's the girl?"

“With Sair.” Thadred nodded to the tent. “They asked me to step outside.”

Dain nodded, understanding. There were some things women only wanted to discuss with other women. Men could be the same way. “Have you learned anything yet?”

Thadred exhaled. “I should probably wait for Sair.”

“We don’t have time.” Dain’s tone was level, but he leaned closer as he said it. “Tapios and the rangers found tracks leading away into the forest. They’re still fresh. We need to take the army and go after them.”

Thadred nodded, thinking. “How many?”

“Perhaps a thousand,” Dain said. “Maybe more. A few hundred at least.”

Thadred considered it.

“There are more manors in that direction.” Dain pointed toward the west, inland. “More towns. Villages. We can’t let this continue.”

“I agree.” Thadred cleared his throat. “According to the girl, Vesha is after something.”

“What could it be?” Dain demanded. “What could possibly be in these towns and villages she’s destroying?”

Thadred bit his lip. “I don’t know.” He tried to think over everything he had learned from Brother Kaphen. Perhaps they should have brought the monk with them. The knight lowered his voice, stepping closer and turning away from the soldiers. “Something is wrong, Dain.”

His cousin shook his head. “I know.”

“We’re missing something.”

Dain looked past him to Sair’s tent.

“Vesha is going to do something and it’s going to be bad. Probably worse than anything we have seen.”

“I shudder to think.”

“Me too, but we’re going to have to figure it out if we want to stop her.”

Dain pinched the bridge of his nose. “She said she wanted to stop the disasters. The earthquakes, the floods, the famines. She said she just wanted to protect our people.”

“Which begs the question—does she still think she’s doing that?”

Dain’s eyes narrowed. “I don’t see how this could in any way protect the empire.”

Thadred shrugged. “Me neither. But she’s done a lot of things that don’t make sense to the rest of us.”

Dain studied the sky. It was a grey morning. Overcast. It might rain again soon and then they’d get to travel in the mud.

On the bright side, if it did rain, then the cythraul, who seemed to be on foot, would be that much slower.

“Her army isn’t following the roads,” Dain said.

Army was a generous word. Vesha seemed to have more of a mob.

“They’re cutting across the countryside. Moving inland.”

“Which seems like a stupid thing to us,” Thadred said. “But crazy as she is, Vesha isn’t stupid.” Everything that woman did had a reason, as much as Thadred might disagree with her reasons.

Dain turned to Westfall. “Can you get us a map?”

Westfall nodded and passed the order on to one of his men.

Thadred and Dain moved to one of the wagons while the young man ran off.

Thadred adjusted his grip on his cane as they waited. “How are you, Your Majesty? Your wife keeping you up late at night?”

If Dain caught the innuendo, he gave no sign. “The empress is fine,” he said. He glanced toward the burned-out manor

house as he said it. “I think she’ll feel better once we find our enemies.”

“True of us all.” Thadred wouldn’t be surprised if Eponine and Moreyne had a bet between them—Amira versus Vesha. Vesha might be a good ruler and a good leader, but Amira was ferocious enough to tear apart a cythraul with her teeth.

“I saw what they did to the bodies here, Thad.” Dain cleared his throat, looking away.

Thadred had seen a few of the bodies, but he hadn’t gotten a thorough examination.

“I don’t understand...why.” Dain shook his head, shoulders hunched.

“Me neither.” Thad had no answers. Why would anyone tear apart the country you meant to save?

Vesha had made no effort at peace, no effort to gather human allies as far as they were aware. She should have known that she would have the resources for it. There were barons even now who would flock to her side at a word.

But instead, she had unleashed this demon horde. It defied all logical sense.

“Amira wants to kill my mother.” Dain stared toward the manor house, not really seeming to see it.

“Yes.” Thadred nodded once.

Thadred hadn’t been prepared to be heir to the empire, but he had been raised beside one. And he might have been the dandy of the court, but he’d read history.

He knew as well as anyone that regents, especially ones as successful as Vesha, rarely yielded their power when the time came. Vesha was in the prime of her power as far as the empire knew. Dain had not spent time gathering allies for the simple fact he had thought himself unfit to rule. He had wanted to make it as hard as possible for Caa Iss to seize power, but now they were all suffering the repercussions for it.

“You agree my mother should die?” Dain asked, still staring toward the manor.

“You don’t?”

Dain grimaced. “I don’t know. I thought I didn’t, but then...”

Dain wasn’t staring toward the manor, Thadred realized. He was staring toward the bodies beneath canvas on the front lawn.

The soldier returned with a map. “Here, Your Majesty.”

Thadred accepted the map and smoothed it out.

“The first reports came from here, Iandua.” Dain pointed to the imperial colony across the Jaunty Straights. “She returned to the mainland around here.” He pointed to a spot down the coast, just a hundred leagues or so from Mynadra. “We assumed that was a mistake, but ever since Vesha and her horde have landed, they seem to be heading inland at southwest instead of due south toward Mynadra.”

Thadred nodded. “Thurston is around here.” He pointed to a blank space on the map. Thurston had been too small a town to be included on this map.

Dain nodded. “We’re now in this area.” His cousin pointed to a space marked out as forest. “They’re moving inland, but away from Mynadra.”

“So what’s over there?” Thadred touched the space in the map. He glanced ahead. “Maybe Baron Fenton’s estate here?”

Dain grimaced. “I’m not sure...Baron Eules’s estate abuts his. If Vesha had wanted, she could have gone to him first.”

“You think he’d betray you so easily?” Westfall interjected, looking over both their shoulders.

Dain made a dismissive gesture. The man was remarkably calm about the prospect of being betrayed. Like he half expected it already.

Thad cleared his throat. "It looks like Vesha might be heading for the Mevanmar Mine."

Dain didn't argue, but his frown deepened. "Why there?"

"Well, I don't think it's a social call to the baron, as you said. There are more populated and richer towns she could have raided if that was her intent. I think Thurston and this manor just happened to be along the way."

Dain shook his head. "I am not sure."

"Look." Thadred tapped the map where the boats had been discovered. "It's almost a straight line from there to here, irrespective of roads and the landscape. Vesha is taking the shortest possible route toward something."

"But why would that thing be in the mine?"

"No idea." Thadred shrugged. "None of it makes any bloody sense."

Dain grimaced and gathered up the map. It had been all the help it could be.

Thadred sensed Sair leaving the tent. His awareness of her and the other sorceresses was getting better. Amira was the easiest to sense, but that was because she shone like a torch of *ka*.

Sair approached. Her face was grave, hands clasped together in front of her. "Your Majesty." She bowed, greeting Dain first.

Dain inclined his head. "Lady Sairydwen. Were you able to learn anything from the girl?"

"Quite a bit."

"Do you think we can trust her?" Dain asked.

Sair hesitated. "I think she was telling the truth. How reliable her account is, I'm not sure. Anyone would have some...imperfections in their memory after what she's been through."

Dain swallowed and looked away at that. “Should I send for my wife? She will want to hear whatever it is you have learned.”

“I will tell her when she returns, my liege.” Sair cleared her throat.

Thad nodded. If Amira had wanted to be the first to know whatever the girl said, she wouldn’t have headed off as soon as she dumped Odette with Sair.

“The girl confirms some of what we already knew. Vesha went to Iandua after Kelamora. She seems to have parted ways with the surviving Kadra’han monks in a port not far from Kelamora itself.”

Thadred didn’t like the sound of that. It promised to be nothing but trouble. But the order of Kelamora was a problem for another day.

“After that, she headed to Iandua. Once she arrived, it seems that Vesha disappeared for several days.” Sair glanced to the side. “The girl claims she went into the Dread Marches, and I wouldn’t normally believe such a claim, but...”

Dain drew a deep breath. “What else?”

“Cythraul came out with her when she reemerged. They took some bodies in the city, and ships. They didn’t intend to run their ships aground off the coast. The original plan was to head to Mynadra, or so Odette thinks.”

“Does she have any idea where they are headed now?” Dain demanded.

Sair nodded. “Toward the west, Your Majesty. There’s something inland that Vesha—or at least the cythraul—seem eager to reach.”

That confirmed part of what Thadred had already pieced together.

“I will ask you more on the road.” Dain looked to Westfall. “Ready the men to move.”

Westfall saluted and leapt to obey his emperor as he always did.

Thadred liked Westfall. He was a serious man, not all that much fun, but he was loyal. More than that, he was a true believer in the sanctity of the empire. Despite not being a Kadra'han, Westfall would follow Dain to the end of the world.

“One more thing, my lord.” Sair stepped closer, emphasizing the importance. “Vesha is...changed.”

“Changed?” Dain cast her a look. “How?”

“I am not sure.” Sair glanced back to the tent. “Odette says that one of Vesha’s eyes was removed. Just one. She says that a new eye was placed there, one of the eyes of Moreyne.”

Thadred tried to suppress a shudder at that. He had seen the demonic eyes of cythraul before. But for Vesha’s eye to be removed altogether and physically replaced? That seemed a bit extreme.

“What does that mean?” Dain looked to Thadred, as if the other man might have the answers.

“Don’t look at me,” Thadred shrugged. “I’m still new to this whole demonic power thing.”

Sair shook her head. “I am not sure, but if what Odette says is true, Moreyne might be working through Vesha. She might not be herself.”

Dain and Thadred shared a brief look.

Vesha would do anything for her empire. *Anything*. It seemed she had been just as willing to sacrifice herself as she had been to sacrifice her only son.

“Let’s ready the men,” Dain said. “Lady Sairydwen, prepare the girl to move. You’re sure she’s not possessed?”

“As sure as I can be,” Sair answered. “I think she was just caught up in this.”

Dain gave a curt nod. “Thad, I need you to help Sair with whatever she needs. Men, with me.”

“I—” Thadred turned, but Dain was already gone. The young emperor marched amongst his soldiers like a man headed to war. He spoke curtly with the soldiers, instructing them to get the animal drivers ready to move. Thadred turned back to Sair. “My lady, how might I help you?”

Sair rubbed her arms, pulling in on herself. “That girl has been through so much.”

Thadred cocked his head to the side. “They hurt her?”

“Very much.” Sair exhaled.

“She told you?”

Sair shook her head. “I suspect it. By the way she left things out.”

Thad didn’t want to be insensitive, but he had to ask. “You’re sure she wasn’t leaving out things because she’s lying?”

Sair cast Thadred a wan look. “No, I’m afraid.”

“It’s bad enough you’d rather she was a spy?”

Sair exhaled slowly. “I’m not sure. Maybe.”

Thadred stepped closer. “I’m glad you’re here.”

Sair blinked up at him. “All I did was ask her questions.”

“Yes, but you did it in a gentle and kind way. I would have bungled it, and Amira would have had the girl at knifepoint the whole time.”

Sair scoffed. “Maybe you’re right.” She pulled her shawl tighter around her shoulders. “I wish...” She swallowed. “Horrible things happen to so many people for no reason, and I don’t understand. It’s not fair.”

Thadred put an arm around her and Sair leaned into him. A little surprised at himself, Thadred pulled her into an embrace.

To his shock, she didn't pull away, but pressed her face against his chest. Sair leaned on him, breathing slowly like she was trying to steady herself. Like touching him brought her comfort.

That thought made him want to hold on. He couldn't fix the world, but perhaps he could fix a tiny piece of it within the circle of his arms and keep her there forever.

"It's not fair," Thadred agreed. He'd often felt the same way. He had been born a strong, healthy man. But one instant had robbed him of that.

Now he was a cripple for life. He would never be as fast or as fit as the men around him, even those who trained half as much. Without a horse, a lance, and armor, Thadred was just a palace ornament. Learning to use his own magic had made him somewhat more powerful, but he was still learning.

There was a reason Westfall was captain of the guard, and not Thadred.

Sair pulled away from him, drawing a deep breath. "Forgive me."

Thadred shook his head. "No need." He tried to stuff down the feeling of loss as she stopped touching him.

She batted at her tears. "We should be able to stop them."

"You sound quite sure, my—" Thadred choked back the word that had almost come out. He'd almost said *my dear* but stopped himself just in time. "My lady."

If Sair noticed his brief cough, she gave no sign. "The cythraul can be killed. They're afraid."

"You think so?"

Sair nodded, folding her hands before her. "They're avoiding the main roads and moving fast. They'd have no need for either if they were invincible.

Thadred had to agree with that. "Let's hope our enemies are mortal, then."

Sair nodded curtly.

A horn sounded, calling the army to readiness. Thadred found himself straightening out of habit, then remembered he was no longer a soldier. “When we find them...”

“Yes?”

“What will you do?” Thadred wasn’t sure how else to phrase the question.

“I will do what I can alongside Empress Amira.” Sair exhaled. “I am not as strong as she is, of course. None of us are. But I should be of some use helping the injured and stopping any demons who get too close.”

Thadred chewed his lip. “Do you think...perhaps...” He cleared his throat. What he wanted to ask was unreasonable. He knew that.

“What?”

“It’s just...I’m sure your brother would feel better if you stayed out of harm’s way.”

“Tapios knows we must fix this.” Sair adjusted her shawl again. “In a way, this is my fault, too, you know. I lent my power to that spell. The one that freed Caa Iss.”

“You were a child,” Thadred said flatly.

“I was fourteen, Thadred. Almost an adult.” Sair looked to her hands. “I watched as they cut Amira’s arms. I heard her scream. My mother told me it was necessary, and I believed her.” Sair shook her head. “I owe this to the empress. If not her, then those murdered people. If we had not unleashed Caa Iss, none of this would have happened.”

“You can’t blame yourself for everything,” Thadred said.

“No. This whole thing is the result of dozens, perhaps hundreds of decisions made by all of us. But it will take all of us now to undo it.”

“If you must fight them...” Thadred swallowed. He had seen what the monsters had done to the manor residents. Those

had just been innocent bystanders. What would the monsters do to Sair, someone who was their outright enemy? “Be careful, Sair. Please.”

Sair looked up to him, her brows pinched.

“For Rhis.” Thadred cleared his throat. “And...Tapios, too.”

“Of course,” Sair agreed, her voice almost too soft to hear.

Chapter Sixteen

Amira

They pressed on through what remained of the daylight and were then forced to stop in a clearing for the night. It was too dark for the horses to see, though the world was alive with *ka* to Amira's senses.

Amira and Daindreth spoke with the officers, Westfall, Sair, and the other Istovari. They discussed plans and preparations for meeting the cythraul. It was possible their horses wouldn't go near the creatures at all, so they might have to fight the demons on foot.

Amira and Daindreth made their way back to their own tent. On the way, they passed the one that Sair was sharing with another of the Istovari women and the captive handmaiden.

At least, Amira considered her a captive. If it had been up to her, the girl would have been held in a separate tent, preferably in chains. Only Sair's intervention had stopped her.

As it was, Amira had insisted that extra guards be posted outside Sair's tent tonight in case anything went wrong. She'd never forgive herself or Sair if that girl turned out to be hosting a dormant cythraul or just turned out to be a simple traitor. Amira had very few friends, but Sair had become one of them.

"That girl should be put on trial," Amira said flatly as they passed Sair's tent.

Daindreth let off a longsuffering sigh. "She's a victim, Amira."

"She admits to aiding and abetting Vesha while that woman ordered the outright butchery of innocents." Amira didn't understand why she was the only one to see it that way.

"She's a servant. A merchant's daughter. I can hardly expect her to defy an army of cythraul when I barely held out

against *one*.” Daindreth nodded to the guards outside their tent and pulled aside the flap for her.

Amira let off an exasperated sound. “Husband, you can’t forgive all your enemies.”

Daindreth chuckled at that. “If I have reason to fear a half-starved handmaiden, I will have bigger problems.”

Amira shucked off her boots. “Fine.”

Daindreth began untying the scarf around his neck, then the toggles at the front of his tunic. He’d sent his valet away.

Amira removed her leathers and the padded vest underneath. It was light armor, but it would stop blows from most swords and spears. That was assuming, of course, that whoever wielded the sword wasn’t possessed of superhuman strength.

Daindreth removed his own boots and climbed onto the narrow cot they had been sharing for the past few nights. “Come here.”

Amira obeyed, standing in front of him.

Daindreth wrapped his arms around her, pressing his cheek against her belly. “You’re very afraid, my love.”

“I will fight for you,” she said fiercely.

“I know.” Daindreth pulled back. In the darkness, she only knew he looked up to her by the outline of his *ka*. “But you’re angry and irritable and accusing cythraul’s victims of being spies. I know you’re afraid.”

Amira ran her fingers through his hair. Neither of them had bathed since leaving Mynadra. They smelled of sweat, horses, and the road, yet she felt she couldn’t breathe him in deeply enough. “I never thought I would have this,” Amira whispered. “Any of it.”

Daindreth stroked her back.

“I met you just a few months ago and my entire life changed. I’m happy. I’m free of my father. I have *friends*.”

I'm...I'm someone important, not just the bastard stepdaughter anymore.”

Daindreth pulled her closer. “These past few months have been eventful for me as well.”

“I can’t fight for you if...if I lose you.” Amira pressed her hand against his chest. “Then it will be too late. When I imagine losing you, I think I would tear apart the world to get you back. I would carve out my own heart, but...if I do lose you, then it will be too late. So I have to fight for you now.”

Daindreth drew her down onto the pallet. “So much fear.” He kissed her gently, feeling his way along her face in the dark.

Amira clenched his arm, her fingers twisting in his sleeve.

He nipped her neck and she gasped softly. “Careful, my love,” he murmured, an edge of mischief in his tone. “There are guards outside.”

Amira bit her lip and let him roll on top of her. He nuzzled her neck, inhaling her scent. He reached for the front of her breeches, one hand loosening her belt. “Can we?” he asked, voice low beside her ear.

As much as Amira would have enjoyed having him inside her, she wasn’t foolhardy enough to risk it when her abdomen had been blooming with *ka* lately. “No,” she answered reluctantly. “Not for another day or so.”

“That’s alright,” Daindreth whispered back. “There’s other things I can do.” He wrestled off her breeches in the dark and knelt between her legs. He nuzzled the inside of her thigh, licking along her skin.

It was a long time before either of them spoke after that.



Daindreth and Thadred suspected that Vesha was headed toward a mine. Amira wasn't sure what could be in that mine and neither was Sair, but they seemed to be right.

The next day, the trail of the cythraul continued in a haphazard fashion across the land. It seemed that the creatures were taking the shortest possible route toward the mine, if that was indeed their destination.

Amira rode with Tapios and several of her assigned soldiers. The army extended before and behind them. The lieutenant assigned to lead them was a young man named Vansen. He was probably a year or two younger than Amira, but Westfall seemed to think highly of him. He was newly made a knight, from a minor noble family.

Someday, perhaps Amira would have more sorceresses in her contingent, but for now she just had Sair and a few rangers. If Vansen was uncomfortable around them, he hid it remarkably well. Some of the other knights hid it less well, but Vansen seemed to take this warrior empress and her strange group of magic users in stride.

“This will strengthen my shield?” Vansen asked as Sair traced lines over it as they rode. Amira could see the lines of *ka* being woven into the steel.

Metal was hard to work with, especially when it came to holding *ka*. There usually needed to be bone or some other formerly living material worked into the metal for it to be effective.

“It will,” Sair nodded. “Though the spell might wear off after a few days. But if we do catch up to the cythraul soon...” Sair passed the shield back to the knight.

Sir Vansen cleared his throat. “Lady Sair, and Your Grace, if I may be so bold.”

“Yes?” Amira kept her attention ahead. The forest was silent and harmless as best she could tell and yet she couldn't shake the feeling that they would be meeting with trouble soon.

“These...cythraul. You say they are demons?”

“Yes.” There was no point in keeping the secret. These soldiers would most likely be fighting the creatures hand to hand soon.

“And they can take over people? Men, women, even children from the sound of it?”

“Yes,” Amira confirmed. “But not without an agreement.”

Little by little was being revealed to the people of the palace and the common soldiers. The full truth might never be known to the greater empire.

Someday, chroniclers might tell of Empress Vesha and her witchcraft. They’d no doubt include the child sacrifice, that was riveting enough. Vesha’s relationship with Darrigan would no doubt become a torrid affair.

Perhaps one day, it would be alleged that Vesha and Darrigan were lovers who had conspired to curse Drystan and take over the empire.

Amira sometimes wondered if her own legacy would be idealized or scandalized. If they succeeded at banishing the cythraul and stabilizing the empire, would history remember her fondly? No one could tell.

She might be remembered as the seductress who swayed Daindreth away from his intended bride. She might be the warrior princess who saved him or any other number of things. She might not be remembered at all.

Vansen was quiet for a long set of heartbeats and Amira was sure he was thinking over his next words carefully. “So, can they possess us? Our fellow soldiers?”

“No,” Amira answered. She was certain of that. “Cythraul need permission. That’s why they torture people or let some people go. It’s all part of bargains.”

“Then why kill the people at that manor?” the young knight asked.

“For sport, according to the handmaiden.” Amira was no expert, but cythraul were not hard to understand. She might be mistrustful of the girl, but she was willing to believe that part.

Vansen brought his horse up beside Amira’s little mare. His voice dropped and he leaned closer to keep his men from overhearing. “My empress, what am I supposed to tell my men? According to you, we face monsters from the Dread Marches.”

Amira kept her attention on the road ahead. She wished Thadred was here, but he was riding with Daindreth at the moment, back with the main part of the army. She and the knight had been taking turns since she was stronger with sensing *ka*.

“I’m a Kadra’han, Vansen. Did you know that?”

The knight remained impassive. “I have heard rumors.”

“My father made me into one. Before he handed me off to the emperor, he used me as an assassin. I killed smugglers, pirates, and bandits for the most part. They’re pesky creatures that tend to hurt taxes, you see.”

The knight was quiet. “I have...heard stories about you.” He sounded like he didn’t believe all of them. That was fine. Amira sometimes found the stories hard to believe herself. And she had lived them.

“I don’t know how to talk to soldiers. I’ve never been a soldier,” Amira said. “Every opponent I’ve ever fought had some advantage over me. Usually they were bigger, stronger.” Amira exhaled, not sure where to go with this. “There was this one smuggler I fought once. A big man. Arms like tree trunks. He caught me sneaking around their hideout.” Amira frowned, thinking back to that night. “He picked me up like I was nothing and smashed my head into some barrels. I thought for sure I was dead.” Amira shrugged. “He could have finished me off. He had a club, but for whatever reason, he picked me up and slammed me into the wall.” Amira swallowed. “I guess

he thought it would be fun to choke me to death. Either way, I got one of my knives out and sliced him open like a fish.”

It had been a gory, bloody kill. Even after she'd cut him open, the large man had punched her in the face. She'd been sure her jaw was broken at the time, but she'd gotten lucky.

The man's comrades had found her standing over his corpse, covered in the man's guts in a pool of blood. The look of horror on their faces might have been comical under different circumstances.

“Monsters aren't immortal,” Amira said. “Cythraul are strong, fast, and vicious. But they bleed and they can die.”

Vansen seemed to consider that for a moment. “You seem quite certain.”

Amira looked to Vansen. “You didn't become a soldier to live a safe life. Neither did any of your men.”

Vansen smiled wanly at her. “I became a soldier because I'm a third son.”

Amira shrugged. “Such is the way of things, isn't it?”

“I suppose so.”

Amira glanced to Sair at her side. The sorceress knew as well as any of them the risks of hunting cythraul, but she had still accompanied them. She still chose to fight alongside Amira and Daindreth to return these creatures to the Dread Marches.

Up ahead, Amira sensed a horse and rider approaching their column before the scout came galloping into view. The man was riding too fast.

Amira's hands tightened on the reins as the soldier stopped beside one of the officers and presumably gave his report. Another scout came galloping back, veering straight for his own commander.

Amira looked to Sair.

Sair bit her lip, then looked away, searching over the heads and the horses around them.

Sure enough, Thadred pushed through the lines, making his way toward them. Lleuad was shorter than most the other horses, meaning that Thadred was shorter than most riders on horseback.

The little black stallion snapped at the horses who didn't move out of his path quickly enough, little ears pinning in outrage. "Empress Amira!" Thadred shouted, a pair of soldiers riding close behind him. He nodded to Sair as he reached them before addressing Amira. "The cythraul have been spotted."

Amira had been prepared for those words, but they still brought a rush of emotions. Relief—they'd finally caught up with the demon horde—and fear. It was time to fight the battle for Erymaya, then. It was time to stand against Vesha one final time.

And it *would* be the final time. Amira had no intention of letting the former empress walk away from this.

Amira turned and faced ahead. She couldn't sense the cythraul yet. They couldn't be too close. "How far?"

"Five miles or so, according to the scouts. They seem to have taken over the mine, just as we suspected." Lleuad snarled at Tapios' horse and Thadred jerked him back. "The scouts don't have numbers yet, but they guess a thousand or more."

"Over a thousand?" Amira hoped some of that was exaggeration from the scouts.

"Then their numbers have recovered," Sair said. "More of the creatures must have found new hosts since the incident with the farmers."

Amira tried to think. "Do we know anything else yet?"

Thadred shook his head. "Just their numbers. The scouts weren't able to get close. Their horses refused."

That was on par with what they had seen of cythraul and animals so far. Amira nodded quietly. “Yes, that makes sense.”

“If they were looking for a defensible position,” Thadred said, “that mine definitely does the trick.”

Amira had considered that. She hadn’t seen this mine. It might be the most impenetrable fortress in the empire. But if the cythraul had wanted defenses, they could have taken any number of fortresses nearby. Vesha could have weaseled her way into the castle of her choice.

Instead, the creatures had rushed here as fast as they could. There had to be something here.

“What kind of mine is it?” Amira asked.

“Salt,” Thadred answered.

“Hmm.” It was valuable, but hardly a resource that would tip the scales in a war. No, there definitely had to be something else to this.

“The emperor asks that you attend him, Your Grace,” Thadred said, using her title for the benefit of the soldiers.

“Lead the way.” Amira fought the impulse to rush to Daindreth as fast as she could. She needed to think. They needed to plan.

So far, Vesha had resorted to witchcraft every time she got desperate. This had to have something to do with that. Amira just didn’t know what yet.

She found Daindreth still on horseback but surrounded by Westfall and his officers.

When he saw her, some of the tension in the emperor’s face left. He reached out as she pulled her horse up beside him. They touched briefly, gloved hands meeting in the space between their horses.

“As I was saying, we approach carefully,” Daindreth said. “We come as close as the horses will allow.” He looked to Amira. “Do you sense anything?”

Amira shook her head. “No sign that the scouts were followed.”

“We must still assume that they know we are here.” Daindreth slipped into command like a favorite pair of boots. He was good at leading, excellent at it, in fact. “See to it that your soldiers are prepared. They are to keep any strangers out of striking distance. Cythraul can look normal if they so choose, but that will cost them their healing and their enhanced strength. Keep that in mind if you confront them.”

“My liege, I would advise you to set up camp here,” Westfall said. “We can wait for more reports.”

Daindreth looked to Amira, though she wasn't sure why.

Amira looked back to Westfall. She had the impression that the new guard captain didn't like her. But he didn't need to like her, he just needed to keep her husband safe. She would trust his judgment on that.

Daindreth shifted in his saddle. “We can wait for reports. But we need to see to it that the creatures are not pillaging the countryside.”

Westfall seemed satisfied with that answer and so Amira nodded.

Daindreth might be a good leader and he might be a good emperor, but he was new to war. War was one thing that Westfall and Thadred knew better.

“We've been in contact with the nearby town, Mevanmar,” Westfall said. “They confirm they lost contact with the mine and are preparing a tally of the missing. One of their headman, fellow named Ilvertas, should be presenting the rolls soon. They have been instructed to seal their gates and stay away.”

“I want to scout ahead with Thadred and Lady Sairydwen,” Amira interjected.

Daindreth's mouth went tight. “You can't use dreadsight spells on cythraul.”

Amira almost laughed at that. She'd learned about cythraul's immunity to dreadsight spells the first night they'd met. "Correct. We won't get too close. I just want to see if we can find any evidence of Vesha working witchcraft."

"And if she's set a trap for you?"

Amira shrugged one shoulder. She assumed that Vesha wanted her dead as much as she in turn wanted Vesha dead. "Then I will take only Thadred."

"Why me?" Thadred sounded insulted.

"Because Lleuad can eat anything that attacks us."

Daindreth shook his head. "No, Amira."

Amira leaned over, away from Westfall. "You know I might be the only match for Vesha in the world. You're sending soldiers to do a sorceress' job. You're setting them up for failure."

Daindreth straightened, staring straight ahead.

Amira watched him for a long moment. She honestly wasn't sure if he would relent or not. She was his empress now, not just his sorceress and assassin. And it was true she might be the only magic user who came close to Vesha's level of power.

Daindreth turned to her, jaw tight. "You stay out of the range of arrows and any other weapons they might have. Do you understand me?"

Amira nodded. "Of course."

"You scout the outside of the mine and then you come right back. Do you understand?"

"Yes, my love." Amira felt like a child asking permission to visit market.

Daindreth looked to Sir Vansen behind Amira. "You protect her."

Vansen nodded. "With my life, Your Majesty." It sounded like a practiced response to Amira, but she didn't doubt that the boy would die for her if it came down to it. If nothing else, the training of soldiers thoroughly brainwashed them into believing in the empire.

"Lord Thadred?"

"We'll bring her back alive," Thadred muttered.

Sair straightened. "I will come with you."

"No," Thadred snapped, a little too quickly. He glanced to Daindreth, then corrected himself. "We can't have both our sorceresses scouting at the same time. One of you needs to stay behind."

They had other sorceresses among the rangers, if not with Sair's level of experience or effectiveness. But Amira took one look at the tightness on Thadred's face and didn't say that.

Amira looked to Westfall. "Camp here?"

Westfall ducked his head. "There's a river nearby. We'll camp alongside it to protect our flank."

Amira gathered the reins of her horse. "Lord Thadred. Sir Vansen. Tapios."

The ranger glanced to Sair, asking his sister's permission. Sair nodded and Tapios brought his horse to attention.

Amira cast one final look to Daindreth. "I will be back soon."

Daindreth's face had turned strained. He looked as if he was struggling through some great pain.

Amira looked to Westfall. "Can one of the scouts show me there?"

Westfall nodded. His face was stern as it usually was, framed by his steel helmet. "Have the corporal show the empress to the mine," he ordered a man to his left.

Amira nudged the sides of her little mare. "Let's go."

A young man who couldn't have been more than sixteen met them. "Corporal Evers, Your Majesty," the boy panted, bowing in his saddle.

"Good to meet you," Amira said, looking past the boy. "I believe you found the mine?"

"Yes, my lady—I mean, Your Grace." The boy cleared his throat and glanced to Thadred.

"Show me."

Her three guards fell in around her as her horse broke into a trot. Amira pulled up the cowl of her cloak. A red-haired woman in a hunting habit with two knights and a ranger would be easily recognized. But a second ranger following a scout was less suspicious.

Amira had a short horse bow and a quiver slung to the back of her saddle just in case. But if she did as Daindreth instructed, she wouldn't need them.

They headed in the direction the scouts had come from, wending their way through trees and the quiet forest. Birds and insects hummed around them.

The forest seemed so peaceful. So painfully normal.

Amira began to wonder if the cythraul really were ahead of them. She couldn't sense anything.

"The mine should be up that way, Your Grace." Corporal Evers took them through the trees, sounding a little breathless.

Amira thought he seemed too young, but then again...when she had been his age, she had been taking heads for her father.

"There's a ridge that overlooks the mine. Would you like me to take you there?"

"Have you been there before?" Thadred asked, taking on the role of Amira's protector, she supposed.

"Yes, that's as far as my horse would go, sir."i

"Then take us there," Amira confirmed.

They wended their way between massive pines and lush ferns. The recent rain had left the woods verdant. It seemed strange that a place so full of life and energy could be harboring the taint of the Dread Marches.

Amira wondered if cythraul had passed between these very trees. Had Vesha walked beneath these pines?

The thought of Vesha walking like a commoner was odd, but the girl Odette said that no horses would go near the cythraul and their wagon had been discarded when it became cumbersome.

True to Corporal Evers' word, they reached a ridge where the trees parted. The riders kept inside the shelter of the trees, hopefully to be better concealed from anyone who might be searching for them.

From here, the mine was an open wound in the earth. The stone had been carved and hacked like a feast day ham. Amira could make out the entrances of tunnels and the deep gashes where the precious salt had been hauled out.

There were spiraling levels to the mine where walkways and paths had been carved as the blocks had been taken from deeper and deeper down. Smoke rose in dark columns, though Amira couldn't see the sources from here.

"What do you think they're burning?" Amira asked, shifting in her saddle. There was so much that couldn't be seen from here.

"Not sure, Your Grace," Corporal Evers said.

"If I had to guess?" Thadred sounded grim. "It's probably whatever poor bastards happened to be at the mine when they arrived."

Amira didn't have much hope for the miners if any had been caught when the cythraul took up residence. She could see dark shapes moving about the walkways and paths through the mine. They cluttered the paths like ants.

“Can you sense them?” Thadred asked. “They’re too far for me to feel.”

Amira nodded. “They’re cythraul.” The glow of their *ka* was faint from this distance, but with so many in one place, it was easy to recognize once one knew how to spot it.

Corporal Evers held out a spyglass and Amira took it. Peering through the lens, she could better make out the cythraul themselves.

They were a ragtag collection of men, women, and children. They seemed to be every age from ancient to very young children. Their eyes glowed red, orange, and bright yellow as best Amira could see. The creatures’ clothes were torn, dirty, and though their hosts had probably come from different levels of wealth, each one appeared like a beggar now.

“They don’t look so good,” Amira noted.

A flurry of motion caught her eye as two of the creatures appeared to fight, though she couldn’t see what had caused it. They tussled on the ground, hurling stones and kicking up dust as more creatures got dragged into the fray.

A cythraul in the body of a woman dragged several of the offenders out of the pile. That creature appeared to shout at the others and the brawlers slunk away, though they glared at the peacemaker.

Amira peered along the paths and the visible walkways of the mine, but didn’t see anyone she recognized as Vesha. Every single person she spotted, as far as she could tell, was possessed by a cythraul. As her gaze drifted over them, she decided that Corporal Evers’ estimate of a thousand was probably accurate.

Amira passed the spyglass to Thadred.

The knight took it, looking over the mine.

“Do cythraul need to eat?” Sir Vansen asked, speaking the unfamiliar word with an edge of hesitation. “Drink water?”

Amira looked over the mine. “As far as I know.”

That reminded her there was a river nearby. Perhaps they could redirect it and drown the creatures.

Amira wondered how long that would take. It was likely that they didn’t have time to redirect the river. Whatever Vesha was trying to do, she was in a hurry.

Amira chewed her lip, thinking. She would have liked to get closer, but that seemed unwise.

“They really don’t look good, do they?” Thadred muttered, one eye shut as he studied the mine through the spyglass.

Amira had experienced the cythraul only a handful of times. Each time, she had seen the creatures only briefly. After dealing with Caa Iss and his pride, she would have thought that the creatures would care much more about their appearances. But she had apparently been wrong.

“That place looks like a beehive. An angry beehive.” Thadred passed the spyglass to Tapios in turn.

Amira played with the strap of her horse’s reins. “What do we know about this place? Does anyone know anything?”

Thadred shrugged. “Mevanmar Mine has been around for as long as people can remember. It produces salt that is sold across the empire.”

“That doesn’t tell us much, does it?” Amira sighed.

“We can ask the local marquis when he joins us.”

“Vesha is likely seeking a place of power,” Tapios said. “She has shown a knack for finding or creating them in the past.”

Amira had to agree with that. “The only power I sense is from the cythraul.”

“Forgive me, but we can only sense *ka*, Your Grace,” Tapios corrected. “There might be any amount of power there for a witch.”

“Or a goddess?” Amira asked as a sick feeling grew in her stomach.

Tapios nodded solemnly.

Sir Vansen finished with the spyglass and passed it back to Corporal Evers. “What are you hoping to find, Your Grace?”

“I’m not sure.” Amira leaned forward, watching as the small shapes of cythraul moved to and fro. “They don’t appear to be working.”

“They look downright bored,” Thadred agreed.

“They must be waiting for something.” Amira glanced to the sky. The sun was full overhead, about to begin its long descent into the west.

“Oh, if I only understood the mind of the insane,” Thadred sighed, sounding only half-joking. “If I was a demon, what would I be waiting for?”

The forest around them was calm, tranquil. Nothing was amiss as far as Amira could tell. That perpetual haze of *ka* hung over their surroundings. Small animals moved here and there like motes of life.

Something stirred at the edges of Amira’s awareness, perhaps a hundred paces out. Amira shifted, turning in her saddle. “Someone’s coming.”

“Cythraul?”

“I don’t think so, but...” Amira checked her bow and her daggers.

“Let’s get out of sight of the mine,” Thadred said.

That sounded like a good idea to everyone else and their group slid back into the cover of the trees.

“Hello?” called a male voice. “Hello? Is anyone here?”

That was a human voice. All the cythraul Amira had met had distorted, alien voices. And their *ka* had been different.

“Please,” panted the voice. “Please help.”

Amira looked to Thadred.

“Cythraul?”

“No,” she reluctantly answered. “At least I don’t think so.”

Thadred grimaced.

“We were attacked,” the stranger’s voice called. “Those creatures chased us from the mine. We...please help us.”

Amira’s hackles rose. She hated this. Hated it. Human instinct was to help a person in distress. And it was exactly the sort of trap she would have used if she was a cythraul.

Thadred held eye contact with Amira for a long moment. “We need the information they could give us.”

If they were survivors from the mine, Thadred was right. Amira still hated it.

“He’s not alone,” Amira said. “There are at least ten of them.”

That seemed like too many.

“If it goes bad, Lleuad hasn’t had blood since those pigs,” Thadred said. “He’ll enjoy fresh meat.”

Amira thought she was supposed to smile at that, but in another moment, the bedraggled figure of a man staggered into view.

“Please,” the stranger held his hip, just above the thigh. He looked like a miner to Amira. An empty toolbelt circled his waist. His boots were covered in dust and he had a sturdy, square build, not unlike a marble block. He had the dark tan of a man who worked most his life in the sun and eyes that seemed unusually pale by comparison.

He did not, Amira noted, have the eyes of a cythraul.

Several figures stumbled out after him, all similarly dressed, but a few of them carrying hammers and pickaxes.

Amira looked to Thadred. Already, she had her bow free and an arrow nocked. She held it at the halfway ready point,

not quite aiming at the strangers, but ready to shoot in a blink.

She noticed that Lleuad's ears flicked. The little stallion's white eyes studied the strangers curiously, not yet ready to attack. He had attacked the last cythraul he'd met, so Amira hoped he'd do the same again if the chance arose.

"Who are you?" Amira demanded.

"We're miners, my lady," said another, removing his felt hat and clutching it in his hands. "We...we barely survived the attack." The stranger swallowed. "We just want to go home."

Amira looked to Thadred. She hadn't expected this. "How did you escape?"

"The creatures came late yesterday," the first miner, the one with the injured leg, said. "They killed most of our friends."

Amira hadn't noticed it since dirt had soaked up most the stains, but the dark shadows of blood marked their clothes. She noticed several of them had blood on their faces and tears in their clothes, like they'd had to crawl out of the mine or perhaps been in a fight.

"We climbed out through a drain, my lady," said the second miner, glancing to his friends. He cleared his throat. "Are you the Hylendale princess, by any chance?"

Not empress, not archduchess—Hylendale princess. Only a few days from the capital, there was no reason the townspeople wouldn't know she was married to Daindreth. Calling her princess was as good as refusing to call Daindreth the emperor. Refusing to call Daindreth emperor...

And why would random miners expect to find her here, anyway? Why would anyone expect a new bride to be out alone, scouting with soldiers?

Amira swung her gaze to the second man. He licked his lips nervously, glancing to his fellows. Amira loosed and her arrow struck the center of his chest.

Thadred let off a shout.

The struck man staggered back, clutching at the arrow speared straight through his heart.

No sooner had he collapsed than a shape rippled out of him. It was a specter made of twisted joints, elongated limbs, and misshapen, mutated features. Amira got only a glimpse of it before the *ka* of the other miners changed.

She was hardly surprised when it happened, but the horses were.

As the miners' eyes went from human to cythraul, the animals shrieked. Corporal Evers' horse bolted with the boy clinging to his back.

Amira's rouncey tried to flee, but Amira dragged hard on the reins with one hand as the cythraul charged.

Thadred had his sword out, a longsword meant for fighting from horseback. He held his reins in one hand but gave Lleuad his head. "Go, Amira!" he ordered.

Sir Vansen dragged his horse beside Amira and her rouncey. His horse squealed in protest, but he had his sword out and ready to protect her.

Tapios held onto his horse's reins, unable to draw his bow with only one hand.

Lleuad charged into the middle of the cythraul. Teeth snapped and hooves swung.

Amira knew they should run. They should just get away from here. They were outnumbered and there was nothing to be gained by this fight.

"Thadred!" Amira couldn't just leave him behind. Daindreth would be devastated.

Tapios' horse swung around and smashed into Amira's rouncey. Amira's mare was smaller, and she stumbled, knocking sideways and skidding on loose earth.

One of the cythraul pounced, smashing a hammer into the mare's shoulder. The mare squealed and went down.

Amira leapt free as her mare got back up. The little rouncey limped, but she jogged a few steps and sped into a gallop.

That left Amira facing a charging cythraul. Damn it. She should have run when she'd had the chance.

Amira's bow was on the ground and her quiver was with her fleeing horse. Nothing for it, then. Amira drew the short sword from her hip, the one she'd buckled on this morning on a whim.

The cythraul wielding the hammer was a skinny man, but that meant little with the demon's power coursing through him. His hammer swung and Amira retreated. There would be no blocking that thing.

Lleuad squealed and Thadred slashed.

Only a few of the cythraul were armed. It seemed they hadn't counted on a kelpie.

The cythraul with the hammer swung for Amira again. The creatures were fast, but even they had limits. The hammer swung wide, striking for Amira's head. She ducked and it smashed into the tree at her back.

Amira jumped forward. She stabbed for the cythraul's side. Her blade met unarmored rib and sheered through flesh.

She stabbed into his armpit, ramming her sword so hard that it struck his heart. Her blade rattled against bone and cartilage as she dragged it out.

The cythraul fell to its knees, gasping. Amira saw the flickering shape of the demon right before the body collapsed, shaking and bleeding out. The demon's mangled features gaped in shock, clawing at the air before it disappeared. Had it been sent back to the Dread Marches? She hoped so.

"Amira!" Tapios held out an arm for her. The other hand gripped his horse's reins, keeping the animal from charging off just yet.

Amira sprinted toward him. She needed to leave. They needed to get out of here and back to the rest of the army.

Thadred could catch up.

Cythraul came rushing on her heels, racing after her intent on murder.

Amira reached Tapios, bloody sword still in one hand. He seized her free arm and dragged her toward him, but a cythraul grabbed him from his other side.

They dragged him off his horse and the animal squealed. It kicked and Amira had to duck to avoid a hoof to the face.

“Tapios!” Amira scrambled to her feet, sword up.

A female cythraul—or one in a female body, had him pinned to the ground. She snapped and tore at his side while he struggled to reach his knife.

A second cythraul smashed a sledgehammer down, straight into Tapios’ chest. Amira heard the wet *crunch* of iron crushing bone and tissue.

She swung her sword, shearing through the neck of the female cythraul. The body collapsed, head lolling by a limp strip of flesh.

With feral snarl, Amira charged the cythraul with the sledgehammer. He swung for her side and Amira dropped to one knee, thrusting in a lunge.

Her blade punched through his groin, just to the side of his hip. Amira wrenched sideways. The cythraul stumbled as she used the sword as a lever. She twisted and the creature tried to bring his sledgehammer back up.

Amira yanked her sword out and hacked down. She struck his fingers where they gripped the hammer. Several digits flew off, chopped away.

The cythraul’s grip faltered. He tried to lift the sledgehammer for another blow, but it wobbled and fell.

“Can’t regrow limbs?” Amira kicked the sledgehammer away. “Good to know.”

The cythraul whirled on her with his mouth open in a demonic yowl. Amira stabbed her blade straight through its maw, punching the sword out the back of the creature's throat.

The corpse collapsed and the phantom of a twisted shape rippled out of sight.

The next instant, Amira knelt beside Tapios. His chest was bloody and his breath came in short, wheezing gasps. "Tapios?"

He opened his mouth and blood came out.

Amira rolled him onto his side. He groaned in pain, but he was drowning in his own blood. What else was she supposed to do? Amira fed *ka* into him as fast as she could. "Come on," she urged, gripping his shoulder with her free hand. "Don't do this."

Tapios wheezed. "My sister," he rasped. "My sister."

"She's fine," Amira promised. "She's safe."

Corporal Evers was gone, his horse had decided that for him. Thadred and Lleuad were surrounded by several dead cythraul.

Sir Vansen remained behind, his horse nowhere in sight. He stood over a body, and it appeared he had just finished off the last of the cythraul.

Amira could sense no more of the creatures nearby and nothing large enough to be a human host, either.

"Thadred!" Amira shouted, trying to support Tapios as best she could. She ripped off her gloves and laid one hand on the side of the ranger's neck, feeding power into him in a steady stream. The forest was rich with *ka*, teeming with it.

She could feel Tapios accepting the power. He had some minor magic of his own, at least enough to channel what she gave him.

Sir Vansen crouched beside her. "My empress, we need to get out of here."

“I know!” Amira hissed back. “Thadred!”

The other knight steered Lleuad around and brought the little horse to stand over them. He swung off, grunting as his bad leg hit the ground.

“What happened?” Thadred crouched down in front of the ranger, a little slower than the rest of them had. “Tapios? Damn it.” He touched the other man’s chest and his gloves came away bloody. He set to ripping off his gauntlets. “Stay with us, my friend.”

Tapios wheezed in response.

“His heart,” Thadred muttered.

Amira could feel it too. *Ka* congealed in Tapios’ chest. Where his heart should have been was a mass of glowing, tangled power. All bodies glowed with power on the inside, but this was wrong. Tapios’ *ka* felt chaotic, dissonant. He was struggling to breathe, and his pulse beat thready against Amira’s fingers.

Thadred laid his hands on Tapios’ chest. “More power, Amira. But carefully.”

Amira wasn’t sure how she could give any more while still being careful. The two of them had once saved a child who had been on the verge of death, but that had been blood loss with no harm to the internal organs. This...

Just like with Cashun, Amira could feel the damage inside Tapios’ body. Bones and muscle were crushed and tangled together in a broken, knotted mass.

“No, no, no.” Thadred shifted, hands pressing against Tapios’ chest. “We’re not doing that. You hear me, Tapios? Stay alive.”

Amira pulled Tapios closer and tried to give him more power. Sair had warned her that too much power could also hurt a person, but Tapios’ life force flickered dangerously faint. They were running out of time.

Thadred swore. “Come on.” He bowed his head.

Amira kept feeding power into Tapios' body. His muscles and sinew drank the power greedily even though they already beamed with power. His body wanted to live. He wanted to survive, he—

His heart stopped.

“No.” Amira felt for a pulse along his throat. “Tapios?”

“Shit!” Thadred pressed his hands against Tapios' chest.

Amira tried to push more power into Tapios, but the ranger's body had stopped accepting it. No matter how much she fed into him, it leached out.

Tapios' wheezing breath stopped and he went limp in her arms.

“No!” Thadred swore heartily and raked his hands through his hair. He left streaks of blood as he did.

Amira laid the ranger on the ground. Her hands trembled as she pulled his cloak around the body. “We lost him.”

Thadred rested his head in his hands, not looking up.

Amira swallowed and touched his shoulder. “We did everything we could.”

Between them, Tapios' body fairly glowed. He shone with the power they had forced into him, shining with all that pointless, futile magic.

“I am sorry about your friend,” Sir Vansen said. To his credit, he did sound sincere. “But, Your Grace, we must go.”

Amira looked up to Lleuad, the only horse that had stayed with them. “Yes.”

The ranger had died for her. She'd barely known him, barely considered him a friend. Perhaps he hadn't meant to die for her. Perhaps he would have run if he'd known...but no, she didn't think that was true.

An odd weight came over Amira then. Tapios had died not for her, but for what she represented.

Amira was the first and only hope of their people. The future of the Istovari rested on them having a sorceress as empress of the empire.

Finally, Amira felt she understood the weight Daindreth felt over the many, many people—Taylan, Darrigan, the soldiers whose names they didn't know—who had given their lives for him. But not just him—what they believed he would be.

The weight of the dead man's hopes pressed down on her as she helped Thadred and Vansen lift the body.

Chapter Seventeen

Thadred

Soldiers met them a few miles from the army encampment. Thadred was relieved to have reinforcements and to have Amira and Sir Vansen back on horses—better for a speedy escape.

But he didn't want to reach the encampment ever. He wished he could simply not go back.

But he had to go back.

Under the circumstances, they had been forced to sling Tapios' corpse over the front of Lleuad's saddle. There had been no time for a proper brier or anything more dignified.

Tapios' arms and legs waved limply on either side of Lleuad. The little stallion didn't seem to care, but every time the body swayed felt like a reminder of Thadred's failure.

They reached the camp and Dain was there almost immediately. He went straight to Amira and crushed her against his chest, holding onto her for a good ten heartbeats.

Thadred stopped Lleuad, feeling sick. Behind Dain, came Sair.

She checked over Amira, too. It wouldn't do to have their Istovari empress harmed, after all, but then her eyes fell on Thadred.

She smiled at him, relief so obvious in her face that Thadred thought he would vomit. Then her eyes fell on the body across his saddle.

Instantly, Sair's whole expression changed to shock, then horror. Amira said something, touching Sair's arm.

Thadred didn't hear what it was.

Hasty words passed between the two women, and Amira pulled Sair into an embrace that was almost a grapple. She

held her friend there for just a moment, speaking into her ear before releasing Sair and allowing her to face the truth.

Thadred wished he could have presented the body better, if such a thing were possible. He wished he hadn't brought Tapios along in the first place. He wished...he wished...

Two soldiers removed Tapios' body from the front of Thadred's saddle. They lowered the corpse carefully, respectfully, and laid him on the ground.

Sair let off a choked cry and crashed to her knees beside her dead brother. She held his face in her hands, crying and calling his name. "No, no, no," Sair whimpered, pressing her hand against his bloodied chest. "No!" Sair sobbed, doubled over her brother's corpse.

Thadred dismounted and Lleuad shifted back, away from the wailing woman. The knight knelt across from Sair, though his body strained in protest.

He had known self-loathing. He had known self-anger. This was something totally different. The amount of crushing guilt and regret was almost enough to choke him.

"Sair," he said softly, barely able to speak. "I'm sorry. I'm so sorry."

Sair shook her head, cradling Tapios in her lap. "Tapios. No. No." She sobbed, clutching him to her like she might force the life back into him.

Several of the other rangers surrounded them, embracing Sair, weeping.

"We need to get him somewhere we can tend to him," one of the female rangers said, her voice soft. "Please, Mother Sairydwen. Let us tend him."

Sair nodded through her tears. "Yes," she whispered. "Yes, we should do that."

The Istovari gathered up Tapios' body, making a sling from his cloak. They carried him away like they'd done this before, like they were used to holding the bodies of their dead.

Sair and Thadred were left there, facing each other on the ground, over the empty space where Tapios had lain. Tapios' blood smeared them both.

"Sair," Thadred whispered, his voice hoarse with unshed tears. "I'm sorry."

Tapios had been a good man. Thadred had considered him a little uptight at first, but he had been brave, honest, and had loved his family. In the end, he'd died protecting one of Thadred's best friends.

Sair's tearful eyes met his. "What happened?" Her voice shook, hands clasped before her.

"We were attacked by cythraul," Thadred said. "Your brother was dragged off his horse while trying to protect the empress."

Sair swallowed. "Where were you?"

"Fighting the cythraul." He could have told her that he had been in the middle of the cythraul, that Lleuad had taken them both into the center of the fray. But that hardly seemed like it mattered now.

He hadn't protected her brother. He had ridden into the forest with one of only two family members she had left in the world. And he had returned with a corpse.

Sair looked away. "I..."

"We tried." Thadred didn't know what else to say. "*I* tried."

"Sair." Amira knelt beside her. "I'm sorry."

Sair covered her mouth with her hands and doubled over.

Thadred sat there, not knowing what to say, what to do. He desperately wanted to make this better. To do anything to take away Sair's pain...but he couldn't.

"Sair." He touched her shoulder, not knowing what else to do.

Sair crumpled against him. One moment, they were at arms length and the next, she was doubled over, clinging to him like he could shield her from the reality of what she had just lost.

Thadred held her, her tears mixing with her brother's bloodstains on his sleeve. He could feel the soldiers and officers staring, looking on at what would have been a scandalous amount of emotion in the imperial court.

Thadred bowed over Sair, trying to hide her from their prying gazes. She clung to him, broken and grieving. Lleuad stood guard over them both, nosing curiously at the back of Thadred's neck.

He wanted to take her pain. He wanted to restore her brother. He wanted to do anything to stop the tears, but he couldn't. No one could change death, and no one could change what was done.

Thadred's knees ached, and his hip practically screamed in protest as he knelt there. Sair's sobs quieted into whimpers and her wracking tremors softened into trembling.

Amira touched the other woman's shoulder. "Sair," she whispered, voice soft. Amira was not given to emotionality, but tears brimmed in her eyes as she leaned down. "Come. Let us tend your brother."

Shaking, Sair straightened. Her face was blotchy and red, her eyes swollen. Thadred would have done absolutely anything if it could have healed her pain.

He brushed back the hair that had come loose from her braid and stuck to her face with tears. She closed her eyes, head bowed. Thadred kissed her temple, pressing his lips gently to her skin. Instantly, he wondered why he had done that. It was hardly appropriate for—

Sair's eyes opened and met his. There was still pain in her eyes, still grief so great it threatened to swallow her.

But something had changed between them. Something. He couldn't quite say what or why he knew it with sharp certainty.

“Sair.” Amira crouched beside the other sorceress, touching her friend’s arm.

Sair allowed Amira to help her to her feet. She spared a lingering glance for Thadred over her shoulder. Finally, Sair and Amira went after the Istovari who had taken away the corpse.

Thadred stayed there, kneeling on the ground. A part of him felt he should go with them, but he couldn’t seem to move. Getting up seemed like a monumental effort, something he didn’t have in him.

“Thad.” Dain lowered a hand to him. “Come on.”

Thadred let the emperor take his arm. Westfall grabbed his other arm and the two of them pulled him upright.

Dain clapped his shoulder in a gesture that was half an embrace before handing Thadred his cane. “When the horses came back, I feared the worst.” He looked to where Amira had gone.

“Your wife is harder to kill than...” Thadred trailed off. No joke seemed appropriate right now.

“We need to know what happened,” Westfall said. “The boy, Evers, came back here and said that you were attacked. By who?”

“Cythraul.” Thadred caught Dain’s eye. “The miners are gone. Either dead or possessed. The cythraul allowed their hosts to have control in order to hide their *ka* from us.”

“Their what?” Westfall wasn’t used to being around sorcerers.

“Sorcerers can sense when a person is possessed by a cythraul,” Dain explained. “But not if the cythraul is dormant.”

Thad nodded. “The creatures went dormant and approached us. Once they knew it was Amira, they attacked.”

Dain looked to where Amira had disappeared, expression grave.

While Thadred had basted in guilt with a few pinches of self-hatred on the way back, he considered the dangerous implications of this. If some of the cythraul could convince their hosts to cooperate with them, it would make it that much harder for Amira and her people to distinguish between friends and foes—until it was too late.

It also meant that at least a few of the cythraul hosts were willing, if only partly. Thadred thought it confirmed that these cythraul weren't able to possess people by force, at least not like they had Drystan and Daindreth.

He had wanted to discuss both these realizations with Sair, but...

"You look like you need a drink," Westfall said, which was practically equivalent to long hug from someone else.

Thadred nodded, feeling like that was an excellent idea. "I could do with that."

"Vansen." Westfall turned to the younger knight. The young man came to attention though he looked tired and bedraggled after walking back to camp in full armor. "Sir."

"He did well," Thadred said, not looking at the young man. He was acutely aware of the direction Sair had gone. The distance between them like a string tugging at fishhooks anchored in his chest.

He wanted to make it better. He wanted to be there for her. He had no idea where to start.

In war, you lost men. Everyone knew that. It didn't matter who was good, bad, or anything else. "Vansen protected the empress bravely and fought the cythraul with honor."

Vansen inclined his head. "Thank you, sir."

"You have my thanks, Vansen," Dain said. "I appreciate you protecting my wife. More than you know."

“It was an honor, Your Majesty.” From his voice, Thadred wondered if the boy was blushing.

“Come give a report,” Dain said. “You, too, Lord Thadred.”

Thadred nodded, exhaling a heavy breath. “Yes, my liege.”

Thadred had saved a girl on the brink of death, the sacrifice Vesha had intended for the cythraul. All the Istovari had talked about that. Even Tapios himself.

But there had been so much damage to done to Tapios’ lungs and heart. The girl had lost a lot of blood, but her wounds were on the outside of her body. Tapios had shards of bone sticking into his organs and pieces of his chest cavity had simply collapsed.

Dain led the way and a group of guards fell in around them. He gestured for Thadred and Vansen to follow. They headed up the hill to where Dain’s command pavilion had been raised.

Amira probably could have provided the necessary power, but Thadred didn’t have the skill to fix the sheer damage done to Tapios, not in the mere moments they had.

“Did you...know the ranger well?” Westfall asked. He would have witnessed Thadred trying to comfort Sair.

“His name was Tapios,” Thadred corrected. “He was a brave man. Saved us when we were lost in the Cursewood. But no. I didn’t.”

“I see.” Westfall followed Thadred’s line of sight. “The sorceress, Lady Sairydwen.”

Thadred’s right hand tightened into a fist.

“Is she yours?” Westfall said it lightly, casually. Either he didn’t care about the answer or did a good job pretending.

Thadred couldn’t have explained why, but a sudden sense of...what was this emotion? He wasn’t sure, but suddenly, he had to fight the impulse to punch Westfall. “No,” Thadred growled back.

Westfall gave a short nod and dropped the issue.

Thadred limped after Dain as they reached the command tent. Dain called for a corporal to fetch the boy Evers.

The three of them answered the questions of Westfall, Dain, and the other officers. Especially the men who had never seen cythraul wanted to hear what an encounter with them was like. The officers asked detailed questions about how the cythraul could be killed, how they had attacked.

The three survivors answered questions for at least an hour. Still, there was no sign of Amira or Sair. One of the Istovari came and delivered a message to Dain. The Istovari girl didn't so much as glance to Thadred.

Dain nodded and gave a responding message and the Istovari girl trotted off.

Finally, Thadred had enough. One of the attendants had brought him a stool, but Thadred heaved himself off it and headed straight to the map weighted on the table with stones. Mevanmar Mine was marked on the map, the nearby town of Mevanmar just a few miles off.

"We have to move fast to save the town," Thadred said, pointing to the dot on the map. "It's northwest of here, so the cythraul probably haven't gotten to it yet. But if we wait, they're likely to get bored and attack it."

"There are nearly eight hundred people in Mevanmar," Captain Westfall said. "You think the cythraul could just take it?"

"I wouldn't put it past them," Thadred said.

Dain rubbed his chin, thinking. He looked toward the camp and Thadred guessed he was wanting Amira here.

Thadred was a little surprised Amira wasn't here already. But he supposed the empress and Sair had become something of friends lately. And friends comforted each other when one of them lost a brother.

"This is a trap," Dain muttered. "It has to be."

“Yes,” Thadred agreed. “But you know as well as I that allowing that bitch to have time is a bad idea.”

“We can starve them out,” Westfall suggested. “If we cut off food and water to the mine.”

Thadred shook his head. “That could take weeks. And these things are resilient. Vesha could unleash even more of them in that time.”

“Do we know what the cythraul want there?” Dain asked. It was a rhetorical question. He studied the map for a moment, brows creased. “You said the cythraul you encountered were looking for Amira?” Dain must have forgotten her title since he was speaking to Thadred, but he should have used it in front of his soldiers.

Thadred shrugged. “We thought they were miners. Then one of them asked if Amira was the Hylendale princess and Amira shot the man square in the chest. He turned out to be a cythraul and so were all the others.”

Dain frowned. He was probably wondering how that had given the man away to Amira. Thadred wasn’t so sure Amira had known the man was cythraul when she loosed her arrow. Either way, it didn’t matter now.

“We need to move the army closer,” Thadred said. “Close them in.”

“We don’t know what they could be planning,” Westfall argued. “It could be dangerous.”

Thadred looked straight to his cousin. “We came out here to protect the people of Erymaya. This is the fastest way to do that. We must cordon off the cythraul.”

Dain considered it for a long, long time. He had gone quiet, as he did when weighing his different options, especially when he liked none of them.

“Look.” Thadred planted his hands on the table and leaned toward the emperor. “You and I both know that whatever reason Vesha had for trapping herself in that mine, it isn’t

good. You also know just as well as I do that nothing that woman does, as insane as it seems, is accidental. Vesha is exactly where she wants to be and that scares me. I'm sure it scares you, too."

"We can redirect the river," Westfall suggested. "Flood the mine."

Dain inhaled a slow breath. "That would wipe out the livelihood of that entire town."

Thadred cocked his head to the side. "They can get new livelihoods. They can't get new lives."

"I doubt they will see it that way." Dain sat down on one of the stools, still looking at the map. "All the same, if we're alive at the end of this, we can work on winning favor with the people later."

"We can have the river redirected within a fortnight," Westfall said.

Thadred winced at that. He agreed with Amira that would take too long. "Can we collapse the mine some other way?" Thadred pressed. "Perhaps if we caused a landslide? Can we just bury them? Bury this whole thing?"

"The mine is massive," one of the other officers replied, a fellow with a boxy jaw and short-cropped hair. "It could take our men weeks to fill it in."

"Can we conscript miners from Mevanmar?" another suggested.

"Every miner who was in the mines is currently missing," Westfall said, and Thadred remembered the mound of bodies at the center of the mine. "Most those left in the town are either sick, injured, or old."

Thadred looked to Dain. "That might help the people forgive you for destroying their trade," he said. "Nearly everyone will have lost loved ones or friends in the massacre."

Dain remained silent.

Thadred didn't like this. Dain was supposed to be the leader, the one who had all the great plans and ideas. He understood politics and yet somehow still didn't hate people. He was the perfect ruler, in Thadred's mind, at least.

But it seemed that when he was faced with violence, when it became clear that innocent people were going to die no matter what he did, things became more complicated.

Armies were like candles. The only way they served their purpose was to be sacrificed. Every good general sought ways to minimize the sacrifice just as every good candlemaker worked to make his candles last longer. But it remained an inevitable and unchangeable fact.

The way Thadred saw it, people were going to die no matter what happened. If they attacked the cythraul and dealt with Vesha, they could stop the dying and put an end to it here. Surely that was better than the alternative.

And they had to attack. There was no other way to be sure they routed out the creatures.

"Westfall," Dain said, his voice steady, but quiet.

"My liege?"

"Send scouts to the mine. Have them seek out good campsites for the army to get closer to it."

"Yes, Your Majesty."

Dain lifted his head, singling out the boxy-faced officer. "Lieutenant Gaidan, send word to the people of Mevanmar that they are to seal their gates at once. By imperial order. They are to let no one in or out."

The lieutenant bowed. "As you wish, Your Majesty."

Dain looked to Thadred. "I need to know what Vesha is planning." The unspoken question hung in that.

Sair and Thadred had been the ones tasked with hunting down those answers. They had been the ones who had scoured

the books with Brother Kaphen and hunted through dusty tomes for hours at a time.

“I think,” Thadred said, choosing his words carefully. “Lady Sairydwen might not—”

“Thadred.” Dain fixed him in a hard look. “I will speak with Lady Sairydwen myself if I must, but we may need to attack soon, and I would rather know the significance of this place before then. And why Vesha came here.”

“Could it not be the most defensible place in the region?” one of the other officers suggested. It was a man Thadred didn’t know, but he had the knots of a lieutenant on his chest as well.

Dain shook his head. “She could have claimed any one of the forts or towns she overtook, but she came in a straight line to this place. There’s something here. Something she wants.”

Chapter Eighteen

Vesha

Vesha had never been inside a mine before. She expected it to be a grungy, dirty place, and it was. At the same time, there was a strange sense of...power to it. A primordial indifference.

Humans had been chiseling away at the guts of the earth in this spot for as long as anyone could remember. Generations of humans had taken from the earth's bounty and yet Vesha could see the bounty remained plentiful.

This mine was a giant that had been slowly disemboweled over a thousand years or more. And it had yet to notice.

Vesha sat beside the entrance to the salt mine, hands clasped before her. Caa Iss hovered at her side, great head turning left and right, following the movements of the others.

Many of the miners had fled into the bowels of the earth when the attacks had begun. Cythraul had plunged down after them.

It was unfortunate.

The ritual would be when Vesha and Moreyne were the most vulnerable. They could have no interruptions.

Because of that, Vesha had sent more cythraul down after the fleeing miners. According to one of the men they had captured, a hundred and forty miners had been working yesterday.

Bodies piled in the large central area outside the mine entrance. The dead had been carefully counted, though some had been possessed.

One hundred and fourteen were dead and piled before Vesha in a great stinking heap. Seventeen had agreed to become cythraul hosts under the condition their families in the town of Mevanmar were spared.

That still left nine men unaccounted for.

The miners knew the tunnels well and had evaded capture for the better part of a day. That would not do. The mines needed to be clear before Vesha could perform the ritual.

Or so she kept telling the cythraul, even when Caa Iss had tried to persuade her otherwise. So she waited. And waited.

Cythraul gnawed at the bodies of the dead, finding human teeth not quite as well suited to tearing flesh as they would have liked.

According to the scouts Vesha had sent out, no one from the town had yet approached, but...

A figure came running down the walkway, down, down into the mine. The cythraul's host was a lean female, but that told her little about the creature inside. The creature's tunic looked too big and she ran at inhuman speed, shovel in one hand.

The creature bumped into her brothers and sisters on the way down. Some snarled at her, but they must have sensed she had important business, and none attacked her.

The runner rushed straight for Vesha. All the creatures seemed to know where she was when they needed to find her.

"My lady," panted the creature. She sounded, if not worried, excited. Cythraul emotions could be difficult to parse out. "My lady, someone has attacked us."

Vesha looked to Caa Iss. "Who?"

"I'm not sure. They killed ten of our hosts. All my brothers and sisters who inhabited them were sent back to the Dread Marches."

Vesha winced at that. "How many?"

"Unsure, my lady. But they had horses. There was blood soaking the ground where a body had been moved." The creature licked its lips and Vesha realized blood and dirt stained its teeth. "It's Istovari blood, my lady."

Vesha took just a moment to register those words. Istovari blood. That meant Istovari had fought with the cythraul. “Amira is here.”

Vesha had ordered the cythraul to be on the lookout for the Hylendale princess. It seemed the girl had found them.

Caa Iss made a rumbling sound deep in his throat. “My mother is stingy with her favors,” he growled. “But I would ask for one just for the pleasure of tearing that bitch to pieces.”

“There is more, Your Majesty,” the cythraul said, yellow eyes sparking with excitement. “An army approaches.”

Vesha wasn’t surprised, necessarily, but her chest did tighten. “An army?”

“About two thousand, may be three thousand men. They’re marching toward the mines as we speak.”

Vesha clenched her tattered skirt. She had been found. Daindreth and his Istovari whore had located them at last.

“I think an Istovari died in the attack,” said the scout. “I could smell urine on the ground.”

Yes, Vesha knew that unfortunate fact about bodies after death. “How soon will they be here?” Vesha demanded.

“An hour perhaps, my lady. It appears they wish to block the entrance to the mine.”

The Mevanmar Mine was a great chasm leading down to caves where the salt was mined. From there, pulleys, carts, and levers had transported the salt to the upper levels. It would be easy to close off if you had enough soldiers.

Vesha rubbed her temples, trying to think. “Where is Araa Oon?”

As if her thoughts had summoned him, the demon came marching out of the mines. His red eyes peered out of the gaunt face of his host. He kept the woman’s hair in that tight bun and now wore loose trousers instead of a dress.

He marched up to Vesha with several imps scurrying on his heels like dogs. “My lady.” Araa Oon’s voice never showed emotion, not in the traditional sense. It was a little unnerving. The others at least snarled, cursed, and taunted. Araa Oon was stable—eerily stable. “We have secured the upper levels of the mine, though the deeper levels are still being explored.”

Several cythraul emerged dragging the limp, mangled bodies of miners. They carried the corpses toward the pile at the center.

The cythraul in the chasm whooped and cheered as the dozen or so corpses were tossed into the heap. The rocks rang with their unnatural glee.

Vesha looked away. Had she ordered the bodies to be piled there? She didn’t remember.

“A few of the miners are still evading us, but we should be done exterminating them by sunrise.”

Vesha’s god-eye throbbed. She rubbed at it. How long before it began to burn her skin or just popped out her skull on its own?

“What’s wrong?” Araa Oon must have noticed the scout then. He looked to Caa Iss.

“The sorceress is here,” Caa Iss purred, tail twitching like a cat spotting a new mouse. “Most exciting, wouldn’t you say, brother?”

Araa Oon glanced to Vesha. “My lady?”

“We don’t need to deal with her,” Vesha snapped. “Or the army. We just need to secure the mines.”

“The army?” Araa Oon cocked his head.

“It seems a few thousand Erymayan soldiers are here,” Caa Iss chuckled. “Too late, of course.”

“We can’t fight trained soldiers,” Araa Oon said, looking around the chasm to the madness of the cythraul. “My brothers

and sisters are too newly released from the Dread Marches. They have not yet calmed enough.”

They’d been out of the Dread Marches for weeks. Vesha wasn’t sure what he was talking about.

“We don’t need to fight them,” Caa Iss responded. “We just need to release Mother and she will deal with them.”

Araa Oon glanced around the chasm, his narrow chest moving up and down at an unnaturally consistent rate. “I don’t...like it.”

Caa Iss made a rumbling, gurgling sound and Vesha realized he was laughing. “You don’t like it?”

“No.” Araa Oon shook his head and his whole body with it, like a dog coming out of water. “Something is...wrong.”

Vesha studied the Hunter, not sure what to make of him. He wasn’t trustworthy, no cythraul were, but he seemed to be the least *cythraul* of all the cythraul. Perhaps Moreyne had done something different when she made him. “What do you think we should do?”

Araa Oon tapped one finger against his chin, thin mouth pressed into a thinner line. “We must move quickly,” he said. “Mother must be released tomorrow, no later.” He looked to Caa Iss. “We must set guards around the mine to keep out the soldiers. Two-thirds guard the entrance. The rest go with you into the mines.”

Caa Iss looked to Vesha. He stared at her god-eye for a long time, long enough that Vesha felt uncomfortable.

Finally, he looked away. Though Caa Iss had mocked Araa Oon just a moment ago, he nodded now. “I shall gather the other princes and we shall organize our sisters and brothers.”

Araa Oon made a stooping, awkward motion with his head that wasn’t quite a bow yet was laden with meaning.

“We will move quickly,” Vesha agreed. She rubbed under her god-eye, wincing.

Would Moreyne take back this eye when she was freed? Vesha tried not to think about it. The memory of having her own eye ripped out and the goddess' eye forced in was painful enough. She didn't want to consider she might be about to go through it again.

Caa Iss scurried away to find the other cythraul princes and divide the work between them. Araa Oon oversaw as more miners' bodies were dragged into the light of day.

There could only be a handful of unpossessed survivors down there. It was almost certainly safe for Vesha to go down, but—

No.

Vesha clamped down around that thought. She wanted to do this right. That was all. She wasn't stalling, surely not.

As she had said to the cythraul all day yesterday, she just wanted to serve well. That was it. Nothing else.

Several of the cythraul crouched around the bodies already piled at the center. They gnawed on arms and chewed on legs. It had been some time since the cythraul had eaten, and though they could survive exceptionally long without sustenance, even cythraul needed to eat eventually. And it seemed that the creatures had no concept of cannibalism.

Vesha looked away. She didn't want to see. She didn't want to know.

"The Mirror is below," Caa Iss rumbled as he returned to stand over her. "Not far from us now."

Vesha swallowed. She had known of the Mirror, but she had not spoken its name aloud, much less to Caa Iss. "Moreyne's Mirror?"

Caa Iss grunted in approval. "Yes. The Well is called Moreyne's Mirror."

Vesha clenched her hands on her knees as cythraul marched to carry out her orders. They raced to shore up the edges of the mine and others dived into the earth to hunt for the remaining

miners. Perhaps she should order them to scout the way, next. To find the Mirror and the fastest, safest route before she herself descended.

She leaned back against the wall, slumping into the stone. For just a second, she wished she could sink into it and let the earth swallow her whole. Her throat was dry and her stomach rumbled. Her dress hung loose on her. How could she have lost so much weight in so little time? Her god-eye itched.

“Once your mother is free,” Vesha hesitated, “she said she would not harm my son.”

Caa Iss made a rumbling sound in his throat. “You insisted on that in the deal, did you?”

“One mother to another,” Vesha murmured.

Caa Iss rumbled a laugh. He shook his great head, horns waving over her. “I don’t understand you, empress. You’ll give him to me, but not to death?”

“He’s my only child.” How could she explain it? Daindreth was the last piece of his father to walk the world. If he died, so did Drystan’s legacy. Though she might be willing to turn on him, hand him over to cythraul, even imprison him...killing him was something she couldn’t do.

“Death is not so cruel as you imagine,” Caa Iss said. “She’s not vindictive at all, actually. Maddeningly neutral, some have said.”

“I suppose I will meet her soon enough.” Vesha could sense the end coming, one way or another. Moreyne had told her that she would have to pay the ultimate price to free the goddess. Vesha was willing to give up her life. She didn’t consider it worth any great amount at the moment.

“No,” Caa Iss murmured. “No, you won’t die any time soon, Vesha. Perhaps not ever.”

Vesha closed her eyes. Tears leaked from her human eye, the one that was still her. For some reason, those words filled

her with an aching in her chest. She wanted to rest. She wanted to sleep. Did she want to die? No...she didn't think so.

But she was tired.

And Drystan was on the other side of death.

She wanted to close her eyes and open them without seeing cythraul. She wanted this to be over. She wanted...

"My brothers and sisters will have the mines cleared soon, I am sure," Caa Iss rumbled. "Then there will be no reason not to finish this." There was just the hint of a threat to his words.

He knew she was stalling.

Chapter Nineteen

Thadred

“My son.”

Thadred rolled over, pulling his blanket over his head.

“My son.”

The voice niggled at him like a fly.

Thadred grumbled. He shared this tent with several other officers, their cots lining the edges. It was dark, save for the light of the fires outside.

All the men slept soundly, like men used to falling asleep when and where the situation presented itself.

“My son.”

Thadred finally looked up and let off a yelp.

A woman stood over him, but she was so dark, she nearly blended with the shadows.

She was black—*black*. Not dark-skinned like Darrigan had been or other people from the south and southeast. This woman’s skin was the color of the night sky when clouds blocked the stars. When she moved, the contours of her frame sparked and shone. Did she have stars...*under her skin?*

Thadred pushed himself up, glancing to the sword cane beside his cot. The woman didn’t appear to be threatening him, but he wasn’t in a mood to take chances.

“Who the hell are you?” Thadred demanded. He asked loudly enough that he expected the other officers to wake, but none stirred.

The woman leaned closer. Long white hair trailed over her shoulders and hung to her waist, like the leaves of a weeping willow.

“My son, time is short.” Her voice was a rustle, a whisper.

Thadred blinked at her. “Who. Are. You?” He separated each word carefully, making it clear he would not let it go.

“I am your mother.” The stranger’s long black robes rustled along the dirt floor as she leaned over. “And mother to all your kind.”

Thadred swallowed. “You’re...Eponine?” A few months ago, he would never have come to that conclusion, certainly not so quickly, but he had seen a thing or two lately.

“Yes.” The word was whispered approvingly, like she was pleased to be recognized.

“Am I dead?” Thadred recalled something about the gods coming to claim their descendants on death. He’d never paid much attention, perhaps because he had felt like Eponine didn’t count bastards any more than the Erymayan nobility did.

“You are not dead,” Eponine assured him. “No, you are very much alive.”

Thadred looked around to the other officers. Still asleep. “What do you want?”

Eponine glanced to the side, jaw working silently. Did she look...embarrassed? “I have no bastards.”

Thadred cocked his head at that, not sure what to make of it. “What?”

“Your nobles invented illegitimacy. It was a way to wrest wealth and titles from distant relatives and half-brothers born to concubines.” Eponine crouched beside Thadred’s cot. That brought their faces level with one another. Her hands rested on his blankets, just shy of touching him. “It is a thing of men, not a thing of the gods.”

There were at least a dozen stories told by the clergy of how gods blessed legitimate heirs over illegitimate ones. Thadred had grown up with the tales of bastards usurping the inheritances of their legitimate half-siblings. There was practically an entire genre around it.

“Bastardy is not a thing of gods,” Eponine said, as if she was reading his mind. Maybe she could. “The blessings, the gifts, and the curses,” Eponine grew sad at the last one, “all are passed to the children, regardless of how you came to be.”

Thadred looked away, suddenly uncomfortable.

“You are Istovari, my son. As much as Amira or Sairydwen.” A sad smile shaped her face. “Tapios spoke highly of you.”

Thadred froze. He wanted to ask something but couldn’t.

“Yes. He is with me now. His wife and daughter met him at the gates of Alshone.”

Thadred remembered vaguely that Tapios had lost his family in the same plague that had made Sair a widow.

“He’s happy, Thadred. You have no reason to feel guilt for his death.”

Thadred exhaled and looked away. “Why are you telling me this?”

Instead of getting to the point, Eponine continued to stall. “I keep my promises, Thadred. You are proof of that.”

The knight resisted the urge to roll his eyes. “Am I?”

Eponine smiled, not showing her teeth. “Your great-grandmother lost her only daughter. She was a great healer and revered by her people. She prayed to me for years, pleading for another daughter so that her bloodline would not end.”

Thadred cocked his head to the side, curious as to the point of all this. Goddesses didn’t appear to random knights just to chat, did they?

“She never bore another daughter. But if she had lived to meet her son’s children, she would have known I granted her request.”

Thadred didn’t want to interrupt. He didn’t know much about Eponine. Maybe she was as temperamental as her sister.

“Your power is proof that I hear the prayers of my children, Thadred. I watch over you all. I protect you all.” Eponine’s voice hitched, like maybe she was trying not to weep. “I have made many, many mistakes, my son. Too many to count. But I have always loved you. And I am always with you.”

Thadred didn’t know what to say. He swallowed a sudden lump in his throat that had appeared for no reason. “So, I have magic because my anonymous great-grandmother prayed very hard?”

Eponine made a sound like the tinkle of windchimes—a laugh, he realized. “You could say that, I suppose.”

Thadred nodded, thinking. He could have gone his whole life not knowing that and everything would have been fine. He didn’t see how it changed anything. “And my father...” Thadred stopped.

“Do you want to know his name?” Eponine asked. There was a tension in her tone, an odd reluctance.

“No,” Thadred answered. “I don’t want to know anything about him.” He had once wanted to know. As a young boy, he had fantasized about finding his father, of being claimed by some powerful lord or great soldier and whisked off to become that man’s heir.

But it had been just that—a little boy’s fantasy. Odds were that his father had been some farmer turned mercenary who’d ended up a drunk in some dockside tavern. The type of mercenaries who sired bastards on ambassador’s daughters were not generally the most respectable men.

Thadred had become a knight on his own. He was Kadra’han to the emperor of Erymaya, a warrior and now a sorcerer, too. Whoever his father had been or had not been didn’t matter.

It was one thing to be the bastard son of a noblewoman. In an odd way, all anyone knew about him was his noble parentage. If it turned out his father actually was just an

ordinary person...well, it might not hurt Thadred at this point, but it wouldn't help him, either.

“What is the purpose of this visit?” Thadred asked. “Why are you here?”

Eponine swallowed, looking down. “I need you to do something. It is dangerous. I will do what I can for you and for your friends and loved ones, but you must do this.”

Thadred felt like a rock had formed in his gut. “Yes?” Not that he was planning to do whatever it was. But if a goddess bothered to come visit personally, you should probably find out why.

“You must stop Vesha.”

Thadred nodded. “That's the general idea.”

“No,” Eponine said. “She is seeking to release my sister into your world.”

“What?” Thadred had known Vesha was crazy, but that sounded extreme even for her.

“The witch Vesha plans to become the vessel for Moreyne. Our kind are forbidden from entering the world of humans without permission, but if she is permitted by a vessel, it will allow her to circumvent the God Pact.”

Thadred's heart beat faster. He believed her. What reason would a god have to lie?

“Vesha has promised Moreyne the empire if she will protect it. But my sister's idea of protection is not...the same as most.” Eponine looked down. “As I said, I have made many mistakes. My brothers and sisters too, not just Moreyne.” Eponine heaved a long sigh. “If my sister is allowed to take rulership in this realm, I am not sure what will happen.”

A goddess admitting to ignorance? That couldn't be good.

“Some of the others think we should also seek avatars, but that may anger the Two-in-One.” Eponine rested her hand on Thadred's knee, the bad one, as it so happened. “This world

was given to mortals and so mortals must defend it. But we will help however we can. The others and I.”

“So.” Thadred swallowed. “What do you want me to do?”

“You must attack the mine,” Eponine said. “At once. Before Vesha has the chance to complete the ritual and free my sister.”

“I see.” Thadred inhaled. “The mine is well-defended. It’s a great place to hide, even if there aren’t many escape routes.”

“If Vesha reaches Moreyne’s Mirror, it will be too late,” Eponine said, voice rising suddenly. She paused and looked away. “Once, gods fought for power in this world. We were... poor stewards.”

“You think humans have done better?” Thadred scoffed. He was no expert, but everywhere he looked, the world seemed remarkably imperfect.

“You have, actually,” Eponine answered.

Thadred’s brows rose. If humanity had somehow done better than the gods, that must have been a low standard, indeed.

“You must attack the mines, send my sister’s children back to the Dread Marches, and prevent my sister from returning.”

Thadred looked to the ceiling of the tent. “It’s a death trap.”

“You will all die, if she is allowed to return.”

“You’ll be with us if we do attack, is that it?” Thadred fixed the goddess in a hard look. Perhaps he should be more reverent, but...

Thadred wasn’t particularly impressed with maternal figures. The only one he’d ever had was currently trying to unleash a fallen goddess to kill them all.

“I am always with you,” Eponine replied.

Thadred did roll his eyes then. “Are all gods as useless as you?”

Eponine was quiet for a long moment.

He began to wonder if he had offended her. Should he apologize? He'd rather not have Eponine mad at him when he was about to go fight her sister.

“We are limited, my son,” Eponine said. “It was our punishment. One we deserved, but it does rein in our power.”

Thadred sat up in his cot. “Alright, then. Anything helpful you can tell me before I go to fight your sister? She's also my aunt, I suppose?” As he said it, he realized he was fighting his aunt in more ways than one.

“All pieces of my sister must be destroyed or returned to the Dread Marches.”

Thadred blinked at Eponine. “What's that?”

“My sister has given her avatar one of her eyes.”

Odette, the servant girl, had mentioned that. One of Vessa's eyes was different.

“The eye must be destroyed or returned to the Dread Marches. If it is not, my sister will keep a link here.”

Thadred nodded. “Very well, then. Anything you can tell me about how to beat cythraul?”

“Kill the vessel of the Hunter,” Eponine said. “His name is Araa Oon. He leads my sister's Great Hunt. He is order to their chaos. Discipline their debauchery. Once he is gone, what order they have will fall.”

Odette had also mentioned Araa Oon as a leader in the cythraul ranks.

“Disorganized enemy. I like the sound of that.” Thadred nodded shortly. “Any way we'll recognize him?”

Eponine shook her head. “I have watched the mob of the cythraul as they swarmed across this land. There are perhaps over a thousand of them now. Most are in bodies, but a few are still seeking them.”

Thadred's brows rose. "You mean that more cythraul could grab bodies from surrounding villages and such, then circle around and flank us?"

"It is possible," Eponine said, "but unlikely. As I said, without my sister and without the Hunter, they have no order. It is doubtful that they could maintain it long enough to attack you."

"Hmm." Thadred sat up, moving slowly with his bad leg.

The goddess remained kneeling as she was. She watched him and he realized that her eyes were orbs of darkness. She was a new moon, not so much darkness as a total absence of light. Thadred wondered if this was what she had looked like to the shepherd she had allegedly spent a human lifetime with. If so, that man must have been braver than most.

"You appeared to me, Thadred Myrani, to tell me that we should attack the cythraul at once and without waiting?"

Eponine nodded solemnly, hands still on the edge of his cot.

"Alright, then." Thadred looked around at the sleeping men surrounding him. "Did you put a spell on them or something?"

"No spell," Eponine responded.

Thadred took a deep breath. "Any other help you could give us? A sword that can cut through stone, perhaps? Or maybe a few draughts of immortality?"

Eponine appeared genuinely puzzled, though it was hard to make out expressions on her dark face. "I already sent you a kelpie."

Thadred hesitated. "That was you?" The Istovari had said that a kelpie was a sign of Eponine's blessing. They had said...

"Yes." Eponine's tone said that should have been obvious. "Is there anything you would like to know? Any questions you would ask before I go?"

“Not really,” Thadred answered. “I’d rather have that stone-cutting sword, to be honest.”

Eponine shook her head. “That is beyond my authority to grant.”

“It was worth asking.” Thadred cast the goddess an impish look. “Will you show yourself to Dain and Westfall so that they know I’m not insane?” Thadred frowned. “Why didn’t you speak to Amira? To Sair?”

“I have appeared to all my children here,” Eponine replied.

“What?”

“Time is running out, my son.”

The goddess wavered in front of Thadred and rippled like a mirage.

Thadred opened his eyes on his cot with the first light of morning visible through the tent flap.

Knights and officers stirred around him, readying for the march to encircle the chasm of the mine. Their squires and underlings packed up their supplies and gear, shuffling items into boxes and arranging trunks.

Thadred rubbed the sleep from his face. What a strange dream. He sat up, his bad hip creaking as he did. Wincing, Thadred lifted and swung that leg off the edge.

One of the squires was there, offering him water and saying something about preparing to move the camp today.

Thadred waved the boy off. Climbing upright, he made his way outside the tent.

It had been a dream. Just a dream.

Knowing it had been a dream didn’t help the rock in his gut. He didn’t want it to have been real.

In the dream he had gone along with it, because he’d known it was Eponine and she spoke truth. That was the way of dreams. In the waking world...

Attacking the mine would be costly.

They would have to dig cythraul out of the bowels of the earth like maggots from a wound. Except, unlike maggots, cythraul could heal almost instantly from most wounds, were unnaturally strong, and had a maniacal bloodlust that was, well, *demonic*. If they were actually going to attack the mine, it meant many good men would die.

It was one thing to face a few of them in the forest. Outnumbered more than two to one, Thadred, Amira, and Vansen with the help of Lleuad had been able to take down the ones they'd encountered yesterday, but they'd gotten lucky. It had cost them Tapios, but Thadred felt they were still lucky they'd lost no one else.

Those farmers at Palten Fields had been able to scatter the cythraul because they'd caught them by surprise and used fire. It had still cost nearly every man his life and less than two hundred out of a thousand cythraul had actually been killed.

Attacking a highly defensible position where it would take only a few to hold off that narrow entrance, that was the stuff that made generals shake their heads. Far better to use siege tactics and starve the enemy out, but they didn't have time for that. They need to storm the mine, at least according to Eponine in that dream.

Thadred relieved himself outside and made his way to where they kept the horses. He found Lleuad tied not far from the tent. The little black horse whickered at the sight of Thadred, large white eyes rolling in the knight's direction.

He patted the kelpie's neck. "Good boy." Thadred stroked the creature's glossy black coat, resting his forehead against the animal's side.

A dream. It had all been a dream.

"Thadred!" Amira came running so fast that the other horses spooked.

Lleuad didn't seem to care. The little stallion nosed toward Amira, curious.

Amira was wide-eyed and very much awake, though the tangle of her hair said she'd been asleep not long ago. "Did you see her?"

The rock in Thadred's gut became a boulder. "Eponine?"

Amira licked her lips. "She told me that you asked for a magical sword."

Thadred swallowed. "She told me she appeared to you. I didn't want to believe it."

Amira nodded solemnly. "I need to speak to Sair and the others, but...I think she came to all of us. All the Istovari."

It still felt odd to be called Istovari. To so easily be claimed by an entire clan of people.

"Did she tell you that we need to attack the mine?"

From Amira's expression, she knew as well as he did what a massive cost of life it would be. "Yes."

Thadred could sense Amira gathering power to herself as she spoke, wisps of *ka* spooling around her whole body. He wondered if it was conscious or not. She seemed to do that a lot when she was tense.

"I..." Amira tossed her hands in the air. "What if it's a trap? If it was really Eponine, couldn't it just as easily have been Moreyne?"

Thadred considered that. It was true that they didn't have any way of verifying it had been Eponine. "If I was Moreyne," Thadred chewed his lip, petting Lleuad absently, "I wouldn't want to rush a confrontation. I might send the enemy on a wrong trail or get them to attack somewhere else as a distraction. But..."

"We don't know why Vesha wanted the mine. She might have just wanted it as a defensible location."

"Empress." One of the Istovari rangers came racing up to them, out of breath. "Empress, we've...we've all dreamed of her. Have you?"

“Yes,” Amira confirmed.

The ranger nodded. “Lady Sairydwen...” The young woman hesitated. “She hasn’t stopped crying since she woke up, Your Grace.”

Amira grimaced. “I will speak to her.”

Thadred turned away, shamefaced. Eponine had told him Tapios’ death wasn’t his fault. She even said he was happy now. But wasn’t that what people always said about those who had passed on? Didn’t everyone say that they were free of pain now, that they were in a better place, or something like that?

When Eponine had been speaking, Thadred hadn’t heard the hopeful idealism he usually did. It was more like she was relaying well-known facts.

What was the realm of Eponine’s dead children like? Thadred wondered. Then again, he might have the opportunity to see it for himself soon.

Thadred cast a meaningful look to Amira. “Empress.”

Amira cocked her head at that. It wasn’t often that he used her title in private.

“Have you spoken to Dain?”

“A little. I wanted to confirm with you and the others before I said anything else.”

Thadred could understand that.

“Do you think it was really her? Do you truly believe it?” Amira sounded desperate, like she desperately needed confirmation, yet wasn’t even sure what she wanted the confirmation to be.

Thadred looked toward the sky, where the moon was just disappearing as it yielded to the sun for the day. “I do,” he answered, a little surprised himself. “I’ve...I’ve felt her presence once before.” Thadred hadn’t wanted to dwell on it at the time. “She was there when I tamed Lleud.” He shook his head. “I can’t explain it, but...” Thadred took a deep breath.

“Not that I’m partial to feelings. I can barely sense *ka* sometimes, but Eponine...”

Eponine had been alien, but at the same time, she wasn’t. When he’d looked into her face, he believed she was his mother. There had been a sense of safety, of belonging. Every infant’s favorite person was their mother. Even Thadred, with his limited knowledge of infants, knew that.

Looking at Eponine had been like seeing that face. Seeing her had been like being a child crying out his whole life and then...

“I don’t know how to explain it,” Thadred said.

“Me neither,” Amira agreed. She folded her arms, shoulders hunching as if to ward off a chill. She glanced to the young ranger. “Where is Lady Sairydwen?”

“I can check on her,” the ranger said.

“I’ll come with you.” Amira looked back to Thadred. “We’re going to have to convince these men to go on a suicide mission.”

Thadred considered it. “Not suicide,” he said. “We can win, but it will be difficult.”

Amira cursed softly, echoing Thadred’s exact sentiments. He liked that Amira cursed. He’d always wanted Dain to do it more, but the young emperor was too refined. “Dain is counting on us,” she said. “He will take our advice. He’s no coward and he trusts us, but if we’re wrong...”

Thadred nodded in agreement. “If we’re wrong, then we all get bugged for nothing.”

Amira pressed her mouth into a thin line.

They held each other’s gazes for a long moment. Thadred knew what she was going to say before she said it.

“We’d best get on with it, then.”

Thadred clenched one hand in Lleuad’s mane. “We’d best get on with it.”

Chapter Twenty

Amira

Amira had asked herself at least a hundred times if she was making the right decision. She'd thought that going into danger against the cythraul would be easy. She was wrong.

She'd risked her own life a thousand times with worse stakes than this, but now she would be endangering thousands of soldiers, too. Amira was no stranger to battle, but she was new to war.

Men would die. Men who were seeking to protect her husband.

That struck differently.

Westfall had been able to rally more men from the surrounding baronies, swelling their ranks by several hundred more. Now over three thousand soldiers stood ready to fight and die for the protection of the empire.

Sir Vansen rode at her side in full armor. He'd been assigned as her personal bodyguard along with several others.

At Amira's side, Sair sat with her rangers and guards. No one would know Sair was the same woman who had wept in Amira's arms that morning.

Sair had loved her brother dearly. She'd been as close to him as Amira was to Fonra, but Sair still had much to lose, mainly her son. If the cythraul weren't stopped, then Sair's only child would be at risk.

The mine had several watch towers and outposts. They were intended more as places to load mule carts and conduct business. They weren't meant as fortifications, but from the shapes that swarmed up and down them, that was how the cythraul were using them.

Amira and Daindreth watched atop their horses from the trees as imperial soldiers approached the towers.

This mine was invaluable to the surrounding countryside. When he had learned something of the situation, the headman of Mevanmar had sent word to Daindreth, begging him to make sure the mine was kept intact.

Amira understood—she *understood* the man’s concerns, but she doubted he understood what was happening. Was it really right to be worried about the local economy when a fallen goddess—the fallen goddess—was about to be released just down the road?

From her view atop the hill, Amira watched as the imperial soldiers made short work of the watch tower. At this distance, it was hard to make out details, but the cythraul didn’t appear very well armed.

The creatures attacked the soldiers with abandon, but they were unable to turn the men back or even slow their advance. Horns blew, banners raised. More men tramped forward.

The towers went ablaze as soldiers lit them from below. They were wooden and it wasn’t long before smoke engulfed the structures.

It wasn’t necessary to destroy the towers, just to make them inhospitable for the human hosts of the cythraul.

Amira spotted at least five cythraul leaping from the tops of the towers, a good forty feet in the air. She cringed as the shapes leapt down, landing hard on the soldiers below.

There was commotion and she guessed that the cythraul hosts survived the jump long enough to do damage on the ground. Either way, it appeared that the soldiers dealt with them.

The ranks of imperial soldiers advanced toward the entrance of the mine.

Amira grimaced as she spotted the mob of men, women, and children with red eyes blocking the entrance of the mine. The creatures lunged and snarled like dogs on leashes.

Eponine had spoken to both Thadred, Amira, and a few of the others about the Master of the Hunt, or just the Hunter. Eponine had offered no guidance as to what this Hunter might look like, but Odette had mentioned him as inhabiting a woman in her early middle years.

Kill the Hunter—send him back to the Dread Marches—and Eponine was sure the ranks would break.

Amira's little bay mare stomped under her. She'd been offered other horses by the stable grooms, but she preferred the sturdy little rouncey. The mare might be flighty and skittish, but she was hardier and more sure-footed than most the other animals in the imperial stables.

They'd be leaving their horses behind soon in order to advance on the mine.

“They don't appear to have projectile weapons,” reported Westfall. “No bows or crossbows. Not even slings.”

The cythraul might have charged over entire cities when they had caught them unawares. They might be able to pillage and plunder when they were attacking helpless villagers. Imperial soldiers were not so easy.

It might have been decades since the conquests of Drystan the Conqueror, but the order and efficiency of the Erymayan army remained. Amira had never thought Istovari would be as grateful for it as they were today.

Sair sat beside her on her grey gelding. The sorceress had spent most the day with Amira, teaching the empress how to reinforce shields and weave strength through spear shafts. Spear shafts were easier since they had once been alive.

Sair said that once, sorceresses had ridden with the armies of Hylendale to do just that. Long ago, the kings and lords of Hylendale had married sorceresses, back when the land still suffered from raids from the northern tribes. It had been a different time.

Amira, Thadred, and Sair were the only ones here powerful enough to work spells of this magnitude, and Amira and

Thadred were still new at it. That meant only the men intended for the front lines had spells to help them, but in truth, Amira wondered if they needed it.

Daindreth nodded to Westfall. "Good."

"We don't know how many of them might be inside," Westfall said. "It's possible the cythraul have claimed more hosts from among the dead miners."

"Cythraul can't possess the dead," Amira corrected him. "But you're right we don't know how many miners might be hosts."

From where the imperial party watched, the line of soldiers advanced on the mine. The cythraul fled before them, gathering to regroup farther down the ramp into the mine.

Arrows chased them as the archers loosed a volley after the creatures. Bolts struck them down and a few cythraul fell to lie still, not rising. But far more kept running.

If a cythraul wasn't killed, they could heal, as far as Amira knew. She clenched and unclenched the reins in her hands.

"Thank you, Captain," Daindreth looked to Westfall, "I appreciate your service." He was quiet for a moment and seemed to be thinking. "If anything happens to me, you know your orders. Protect the empress."

Westfall's jaw worked. He appeared to want to say something, but said only, "Of course, my liege."

"Thank you again, my friend," Daindreth said. "That will be all."

Amira watched as Westfall rode back to the officers. He might be captain of the guard, but that made him something of an intermediary between the emperor and the regular army.

"Just what do you think might happen to you, husband?" Amira demanded.

"I'm not sure." Daindreth shook his head. "You're not the only one who had strange dreams last night."

“Eponine visited you?” Amira straightened. “You didn’t tell me that.”

“It wasn’t Eponine,” Daindreth said quietly.

“Who was it?” Amira cocked her head to the side.

Daindreth didn’t answer.

“Husband?” Amira peered closer at him.

Westfall had seen Gwydrun in his dreams. Other soldiers had also seen him as well as Lumë and other gods. Amira and the other Istovari had all been visited by Eponine.

Was it possible that the gods had more descendants than people realized? Plenty of families claimed divine ancestry. You couldn’t spit in a crowded room without hitting someone who claimed some deity as their ancestor.

What if...what if the gods had more mortal children than people realized?

Whatever the case, everyone had agreed they needed to attack the cythraul today, even if reluctantly.

Come to think of it, the only person who had not reported dreams was the young emperor.

“I thought I saw my father,” Daindreth said, voice low as if he feared being overheard. “It was him, but...it wasn’t.”

Amira hesitated. From Daindreth’s tone, whatever had transpired in his dream had been difficult. “How do you mean?”

“He was how I remember him, but different. More and less at the same time.”

“What do you mean?” Amira wasn’t sure how else to ask.

“That’s just it. I don’t know what I mean.”

“Did he say anything?”

“That I need to stop my mother. That she’s making a mistake, even if she means well. That we need to keep her from going through something called Moreyne’s Mirror.”

Amira looked to the mine where the soldiers were driving back the cythraul, chasing the monsters with volleys of arrows and a steady advance of armored bodies with pikes.

“He told me that he was sorry. That he regrets being gone for so much of my boyhood.” Daindreth watched the battle intently, like the distant fight was the most important thing in the world.

A long silence stretched between them, and Amira thought they’d dropped the topic. Then he spoke again, his voice hoarse, barely above a whisper as he said, “He told me he’s proud of me.”

Amira looked back to her husband. She didn’t understand what it was to have a father you liked, but some people did. Daindreth had been close with both his parents as a child. He had fond memories of them, even if they were a long time in the past. She rested a hand on the bracer that covered his forearm.

“I grew up on tales of his glorious conquest.” Daindreth took a deep breath, staring toward the battle. “For so long, I wanted to be like him,” he said quietly. “But then when I was old enough, I heard the stories from the people he conquered. The countries torn apart. The families turned against each other.” He glanced sideways to Amira. “The children who suffered.” He inhaled a deep breath. “My father was a great leader, but I no longer wish to be like him. At least not entirely.”

Amira shook her head. “Your father most likely would have hanged me as soon as he realized who I was. And then where would we be? Probably with Caa Iss on the throne.”

Daindreth seemed to consider that.

“You’re not your father, my love, and you’re not meant to be. You’re meant to be you.” Amira wasn’t sure where those words had come from, but they seemed right.

Daindreth nodded slowly, as if he was digesting her words.

Maybe someday he would see what a remarkable man he was, but today, they needed to exterminate the cythraul.

Back at the entrance of the mine, a great rumbling shook the earth.

“What’s that?” Amira turned in her saddle.

The horses stomped and skittered back. She had to hold on to keep her little bay mare from fleeing.

A crash and roar like thunder shook the earth. Dust flowed into the air at the mine entrance, obscuring their view.

“They’ve collapsed it,” Amira cursed.

Daindreth shouted to one of his officers. “What’s happening there?”

“We’re still trying to find out, my liege,” the officer answered.

“Find out.” Daindreth shifted in his saddle.

The ground stilled and the horses settled. Men shouted along the ranks as the dust cleared.

From the hilltop, Amira could make out the shapes of soldiers pulling away from the entrance of the mine, some dragging comrades between them.

“They collapsed the pass at the entrance,” Amira muttered.

“How many people do you think were hurt?” Sair was at Amira’s side on her grey, struggling to see.

“Not sure. I think a few of the lines were caught in the avalanche.” Amira grimaced. It was unlikely those in the direct path had survived.

“They’re slowing us,” Daindreth cursed. “Time is running out.” He twisted in his saddle. “Genver,” he called.

“Yes, my liege.” It was one of the soldiers who had been running messages.

“Bring me a casualty report. Inform the officers that we are to clear the path as quickly as we can. We have to get through

that block with all haste, do you understand? Tell them this.”

“Yes, my liege.”

Daindreth flexed his neck from side to side as the young soldier trotted away on his horse. “We need to get to them,” Daindreth muttered. “We need to get to *her* as soon as we can.”

Amira had the sudden urge to grip the hilt of her dagger. She didn’t.

Either way, Vesha needed to be taken down. She was too dangerous to be left alive and she was a threat to everything and everyone.

“If I get to Vesha...” Amira hesitated. The topic of Daindreth’s mother had been one of some contention in the past weeks. “What are your orders, Your Majesty?” Amira used his title for the benefit of those within earshot. “What would you have me do?”

Daindreth looked away from her.

“Your Majesty?” Amira was planning to enter the mine with the soldiers. After the entrance was secured, of course. It was possible that Vesha might be killed in the chaos as the soldiers took the mine, but she might not. Her life might end up in Amira’s hands yet.

Daindreth turned back to her, a hardness in him that Amira had rarely seen. “I don’t want her dead. But if you find her, you do what needs to be done.”

Amira should have felt victory at that. Hadn’t she been fighting for weeks to get his permission? Yet nothing about this made her feel victorious. Amira nodded solemnly. “As you say.”

Chapter Twenty-One

Vesha

“We cannot wait any longer,” Caa Iss snarled. He reached to seize Vesha’s arm, but his hand passed through her.

Vesha coughed, choking on dust kicked up by the rockslide. Even the god-eye watered, stinging with bits of rock.

Araa Oon had commanded the others to cause a partial collapse of the entrance to the mine. Vesha had no idea how successful it had been. It was impossible to see.

“There is no time,” Caa Iss snarled.

“We...” Vesha choked, fighting to breathe. “It’s not safe yet. There could still be miners in the—”

“Enough stalling!” Caa Iss roared.

A throb went through Vesha’s head, and she wasn’t sure if she should blame it on dehydration or the god-eye.

“We have waited here for more than a day,” Caa Iss hissed. “You’re stalling, I know it!”

Vesha cowered at his feet. Insubstantial and incorporeal as he was, he seemed in that moment a pillar of wrath. As he leered down at her with those too-large teeth, she was struck by his massiveness. This was a creature who had lived for thousands of years, toppled kings and humbled gods.

She was small by comparison. Weak.

Weeping, Vesha knelt on the ground.

They had taken shelter near the mouth of the mine, the main tunnel underground, while the cythraul fought with soldiers above. It gaped down into the earth like a hungry maw. Over the years, the miners had made the way straight and created a system of pulleys and levers to better transport goods up and down them.

Vesha cowered outside the entrance to the main mine shaft. The last thing she wanted was to delve the depths of the mine—to be surrounded by darkness and the crushing weight of apathetic stone.

The imperial soldiers had circled the mine this morning. Araa Oon had ordered the cythraul to begin work setting up a rockslide as soon as they had been spotted.

When the soldiers had attacked, Araa Oon and the others had urged Vesha to go down into the mine shaft. She had refused. Several miners were still unaccounted for.

It wasn't safe. She had a reason not to go down. For now.

For the briefest of moments, Vesha wondered what would happen if she didn't go down into the mine at all. The cythraul couldn't make her, she was guessing. If they could, then Araa Oon and Caa Iss would have dragged her down quite some time ago.

What would happen if she just...stayed here? What if she sat and waited for the imperial soldiers?

Surely mere men couldn't do any worse to her than what she'd seen these demons do to their victims. If Vesha just waited...what would happen?

"I don't want to go down." Vesha didn't know what else to say.

Caa Iss snarled at her, jaws slavering.

The entrance to the mine gaped like the maw of some great, primordial beast. Something in Vesha knew that once she stepped inside it, she wouldn't be coming out. Not in a way that mattered.

The dust began to settle.

At the road down into the mine above, Araa Oon could be seen shouting orders and commanding the other creatures to shore up the entrance.

A few of the cythraul had been crushed in the rockslide and they were dragged out, bodies snapping back into wholeness in that unnatural way the cythraul did.

Vesha swallowed, watching the creatures. She hated cythraul. She truly did. Unfortunately, they were all that...

All that...

A sharp ache went through Vesha's skull. The pain was enough to send her to her knees.

Vesha fell, whimpering on the ground. The pain seized her entire skull.

Caa Iss paced in front of her. "We need to *go!*" he roared. "Araa Oon has bought us time, but it will not last."

Vesha wept, not sure if pain or desperation caused her tears. "I don't...I don't want to."

Caa Iss leered down at her, his great head filling the edges of her vision. "You chose this," he growled. "This was your decision. You made a deal with my mother to save your people. You knew the price would be high and this is it. Now will you pay as you agreed, or will you let your people suffer and die?"

"My people are already suffering," Vesha sobbed. "My people are dying. Those villagers, these miners..."

The pain shot through her eye again and Vesha doubled over.

"Get up," Caa Iss growled. "Get up!"

Voices shouted from above. Rocks rumbled.

Daindreth was here. Vesha was sure of that. His assassin would most likely be here, too.

In this moment, Vesha would welcome them. Even if she had no illusions about what they would do to her.

Daindreth might be her son, but he was an emperor. Emperors did not rise, not truly, until their predecessor was

gone.

And Amira... Amira was too much like Vesha herself in that way. She would do what needed to be done without regret, without hesitation.

When Vesha pictured the girl's face, she pictured her own death. And she was ready to meet it.

"If you fail here, then this has all been for nothing," Caa Iss growled. "Then all those people who died screaming around you in Iandua, in that village? They died for *nothing*."

Trembling, Vesha pushed herself up. It felt like she was watching another person's hands, another person's body as she turned and began shuffling her way down the maw of the mine.

Steps lined one side and a system of winches and pulleys lined the other. She moved along gingerly, one hand on the wall to her left as she walked.

Her feet were sore and bloody. She'd walked through her soft slippers miles ago.

Caa Iss made a rumbling sound of approval as they wandered down. He hovered over her shoulder like an impatient shadow.

Vesha moved painfully slow, each step seeming to take minutes by itself. The way down was dark, the torches unlit. Vesha's god-eye showed the way, revealing shapes in darkness and shadows. She leaned heavily against the stone until she wasn't sure if the wall or her feet supported her more.

"Yes," Caa Is rumbled. "Good. Come. Not far now. This will all be over soon."

"How long do you think we have before my son and his army break through?"

Caa Iss snorted, as much as he could while incorporeal. "Maybe a few hours. Less, if they are determined."

Vesha swallowed. Just a few hours. A few hours until...

Pain shot through her skull, enough to drive her to her knees. Vesha fell, clutching at her god-eye and wailing with the pain. It was so intense, she could barely think past it.

She felt stone under her as she collapsed, hands clutching at her head. Vesha sobbed, wishing she could claw the eye out.

“Too much!” The voice of Caa Iss pierced Vesha’s agony. “Too much! This isn’t helping!”

The pain subsided, but slowly.

Vesha was left crying on the ground, shaking and blubbering. Her legs were warm and wet. Had she soiled herself? Fresh humiliation burned through Vesha’s entire being.

“Come,” Caa Iss beckoned, sounding less demanding. More cajoling now. “Come, my witch. We have to find the Mirror.”

Vesha crawled to her hands and knees. Her god-eye showed the way ahead through the darkness, down the passage of salt stone ahead.

Shaking, Vesha followed the passage. The pain didn’t return, so she dared to stumble back to her feet. Leaning on the wall for support, Vesha limped into the darkness one step at a time.

One at a time.

“I’m going to die now, aren’t I?” Vesha rasped.

“Is that what you want?” Caa Iss snapped back. “Because that’s what’s going to happen if you don’t hurry. You think your son will forgive you? He will have you stripped naked and whipped before he takes your head in the city square.”

Vesha stumbled along, moving too slowly even for her preference. When was the last time she drank water? For that matter, when was the last time she’d eaten?

Her body felt drained, hollowed out. She had never been this tired, this exhausted, in her entire life.

“I don’t know,” Vesha mused. “It might be a relief at this point.”

“A relief?” Caa Iss sneered. “Do you really want to face the souls of the dead?” he demanded. “The souls of the people killed by my brothers and sisters? Do you want to explain to those people why their daughters and sons were raped to death? Why their babies were boiled in stews and their parents’ skulls bashed in?”

Vesha wept as the memories returned, tears falling from her human eye.

“Do you really want to face them, Your Majesty?”

Vesha choked, crying again. She stumbled along until she reached the bottom of the main entrance where the way branched into at least six different tunnels.

Caa Iss stopped his barrage of insults long enough to glance in all directions. “That one,” he said after a moment. “That leads to the Mirror.”

Vesha stumbled in the direction he had pointed.

Behind her, she heard cythraul following to block the way after her. Sadness rose in her at that.

Did she *want* her son to stop her? Did she want to be found? A part of her was ready to accept the death that awaited her with the army.

If Caa Iss was right and Daindreth wanted her head now... well, an end would be a relief. Perhaps then she could finally rest.

Vesha wasn’t sure where she found the strength to continue down the passage, but she did. Step after step, she forced herself to move farther down the mine shaft and deeper into the earth.

Caa Iss followed her, haunting her every step.

Chapter Twenty-Two

Daindreth

It had taken the army all of three hours to break through the rockslide. With the help of a few former miners from the nearby town, they'd chiseled through the rock, using archers to keep demons away from the diggers.

Daindreth sat atop his horse in full plate and mail, sword strapped to his thigh. He felt the time pass by like claws dragging along his back. Time was running out. He could feel it. The others seemed to feel it, too.

The gods had warned them last night that Moreyne needed to be stopped at once. Something terrible was going to happen. Something awful.

Daindreth should have been visited by Demred. If the stories of the Fanduillions were true, then their patron god, their ancestor, was the god of vengeance.

Instead, he had seen his father. The man he had looked up to his entire life, the man he had practically worshiped as a boy. His father had embraced him, laughing that they were the same height now. Daindreth had been choked with emotion—surprise, joy, confusion—and barely been able to speak, but his father had turned serious.

Drystan's message had been the same as that of the gods—Vesha needed to be stopped. More importantly, Moreyne did, but...

It didn't make sense. His father had been different in the dream than what Daindreth remembered. Different, and yet Daindreth couldn't think of exactly *how* the specter had been different. It nagged at him. The thought was there, but just out of reach.

The way was cleared, and the soldiers began cautiously advancing into the mine once more. From the hill, Daindreth

and the others could see that the cythraul were retreating. Back into the mine?

“Will they be able to collapse the mine shaft itself?” Daindreth asked.

“Not easily,” answered Headman Ilvertas. “We’ve spent generations reinforcing those tunnels.”

Daindreth grimaced. He still hated the idea of sending soldiers into the bowels of the earth. He nodded his thanks and dismissed the headman. Ilvertas was one of several representatives from Mevanmar who had come to help their efforts and to plead for the preservation of the mine. It was unclear if the people yet understood just who and what had taken the mine over, but they understood it was bad.

The young emperor turned to Amira. She was his Kadra’han. They had come through this far because they had stuck together. But staying together might be unwise now.

“If I ordered you to stay behind, would you?”

Amira fixed him in a blank look.

Daindreth heaved a sigh.

“Why are you planning to go in there?” Amira demanded. “Only the sorceresses and I are needed.”

“I need to deal with my mother.”

“This Moreyne’s Mirror?”

“Yes.”

“She needs to go through it?”

“According to my dream, yes.”

Amira grimaced. “If that’s true, it would have been helpful if other gods had mentioned it.”

Daindreth turned back to the mine where the soldiers were driving back cythraul. The demons came armed with pickaxes, sledgehammers, and even shovels. They battered down soldiers, but the line of imperial men kept marching.

The imperial army was an unstoppable force. Many, many other armies had learned this lesson the hard way. The cythraul of Vesha learned it now.

Daindreth's horse shifted, tired of standing in one place for so long.

"There's no reason for you to go into the mine, Your Majesty," Amira said.

"I agree with the empress," Captain Westfall spoke up, his tone defiant, crossing the line of formality almost to the point of disrespect, but not quite.

Daindreth looked back to the mine. "I need to."

Amira and Westfall shared a frustrated look. Well, at least they finally agreed on something.

"My father led armies," Daindreth said.

"Your mother did not," Amira clipped. "And she ruled just fine."

"She is also a woman," Daindreth countered. "The empire never expected a woman to fight in battles."

Amira opened her mouth, then shut it again.

Daindreth understood the irony of saying those words to his wife—his Kadra'han assassin—but societal expectations were often by their nature ironic.

"You being here is enough, Your Majesty," Captain Westfall said. "You don't have anything to prove."

But he did.

Daindreth had neglected his empire for too long. He'd spent most of his life trying to protect it from the creature that lived inside his head. He had tried to *not* rule the empire while Vesha had tried to prepare him for the opposite.

He needed to make up for lost time. He had to become the emperor the people expected—needed—him to be. He hadn't donned this armor for decoration.

In the pit of the mine below, the battle continued, if it could be called a battle. Cythraul were more like rabid dogs than trained soldiers. They fell under the attacks of the imperials.

The soldiers continued to march ahead. Some fell, but others rushed to close the gaps, their shields forming an impenetrable wall.

They had taken on the spear-point formation developed by his father, meant for piercing the ranks of enemy soldiers. They moved like a red and silver beetle, advancing on the red-eyed gnats that were the cythraul.

“This almost feels too easy,” Daindreth muttered. He looked to Amira.

His wife bit her lip, watching the battle in the distance.

Westfall made a harrumphing sound. “It pays to be part of the finest army in the world,” he said with a hint of pride.

“I suppose.” Daindreth couldn’t shake the feeling that he was missing something. That there was something he should have done, something he should have seen to before this.

The soldiers cleared the path down to the cythraul, fighting back the creatures.

“How many are there?” Daindreth took a spyglass from one of his squires and peered through, trying to get a good look at the creatures in the chasm.

The mine was situated in the middle of a giant, chiseled-out chasm. Pathways and circles led down into the main chasm and the representatives from Mevanmar told them that there were several mine shafts leading deeper into the earth.

Daindreth had seen several mines in his life, but mostly those had been narrow caves leading underground. This mine had been active for time immemorial. It had been hollowed out, expanded, and grown over centuries. It was massive.

They all assumed the cythraul would go down into the mine. That was the logical decision and the most defensible place.

Amira poured over a map they'd managed to procure of the tunnel complex from one of the overseers. She spoke to Thadred, who had returned from the frontlines.

Sair sat on her other side, quiet and solemn.

The sorceress had lost her brother in service to Daindreth's crown. Many people had died in this struggle between him and Vesha. More people might die before it was over.

From his spyglass, he could see that men were dying now. It hardly seemed right or fair and yet he was emperor. He wasn't a man to the empire. He was more an idea—an idea that had to survive for the sake of the people.

And he hated it.

“There's no way we can predict them,” Sair interrupted what Thadred had been saying, her tone hard, brittle. “These creatures are the spawn of chaos. We can spend all day choosing the most defensible tunnels, guessing where they will go, but we can hardly expect them to behave rationally.”

Amira heaved a sigh and adjusted her grip on the map. “True. But that doesn't mean we shouldn't plan.”

Sair turned away. “The others and I will be ready to tend the wounded once we secure the chasm.”

So far, they hadn't been able to get horses anywhere near the chasm. That made getting the wounded back that much harder.

Only Thad's kelpie seemed not to care. If anything, the little horse seemed ready to charge straight into the maw of the mine and attack.

“Good,” Amira said. “This is the main shaft, according to the overseer. Everything else branches off that.”

“So Moreyne's Mirror is down there, eh?” Thadred tilted his head for a better view.

According to the dead man that had spoken in Daindreth's dreams, yes.

Daindreth noticed the banners shift and wave. “That’s the signal.”

The soldiers had reached the floor of the chasm. More archers loosed arrows from behind shields, dropping unarmored cythraul.

From here, it was impossible to see, but from the banners being raised and lowered, the soldiers had secured the pathway down to the floor of the chasm. The first step of their attack was done.

It had taken them the entire morning, but their men had reached the mouth of the mine. Horns sounded as more reinforcements were sent down.

Daindreth wished he had a better view. He imagined the cythraul pelting the soldiers with rocks and makeshift spears as they had done this whole morning. He knew most the stones would bounce off, but some would find their mark.

The loss of life so far had been minimal, but it was still wretched. A few of the army’s surgeons could be seen carrying out men on stretchers now.

Before Dain could say anything, Sair spoke. “Forgive me. I think I should see to the wounded.”

“I will come with you,” Thad offered. He glanced to Dain. “If it please the emperor.”

Daindreth nodded. “Go.”

Both Sair and Thadred nodded their thanks. The two of them rode their horses side by side toward where the surgeons were hauling men out. Several Istovari rangers fell in around them, protecting Sair. Something was going on between those two, but Thad would speak of it when and if he was ready.

Westfall rode back up, reining in his horse beside the emperor. “We have secured the pathway down, my liege. Their lines are breaking. We should have the entrance secured soon, but they are fleeing into the mines.”

Daindreth nodded. “As we expected they would.”

They had something of a meal at midday. It was cold bread and dried meat.

Finally, the soldiers announced it was safe for the Istovari and Daindreth, with a contingent of the army, to come down.

Westfall reluctantly went ahead, still annoyed Daindreth would be helping with the hunt. The cythraul had scattered into the darkness.

From the bodies in the chasm, the soldiers guessed that some eight hundred or so cythraul had been slain. The creatures had fought fiercely. Their corpses littered the pathway and the floor of the chasm where many had fallen to their deaths.

The bodies were piled into heaps for burning as Daindreth had commanded. They couldn't risk any of the cythraul surviving. He felt some regret over that. These poor hosts would have an unmarked mass grave. Whoever they might have been, regardless of their reasons for taking on cythraul, they would all be burned together.

This campaign had lasted a matter of weeks, but Daindreth anticipated that it would be talked of for years. Perhaps for the rest of his reign.

Daindreth rode to the edge of the chasm, as far as horses would go. The pathways were wide enough, but no animals would come anywhere close.

He dismounted, armor clanking as he prepared to go on foot. He handed his horse to a groom as Amira dismounted her little mare and did the same.

"My empress," Daindreth looked to his wife. He wasn't sure what he wanted to say.

Amira met his gaze for a moment and then looked back to the commotion below as men rifled through the bodies of the slain. "I'm with you," she said quietly.

"I have to find her," Daindreth said. "I have to deal with her. Whatever that means."

Amira nodded. "I'm with you."

"If we're both killed—"

"Then we won't have much chance to care, will we?"
Amira shot back.

Daindreth closed his eyes.

"I have no desire to survive you," Amira said softly, reaching for his hand. "Either I keep you alive or I die trying."

Daindreth didn't like the sound of that. He would prefer for Amira to live, to spend a lifetime free of her Kadra'han curse and free of her father's demands, but he didn't argue.

Even though his hand was gauntleted in armor and hers was in a snug leather glove, he still felt the weight—the comfort—of her touch. She was with him, no matter what might try to come between them. Fate, the gods, or perhaps blind chance had thrown them together, but she had chosen him as much as he had chosen her. They were together. No matter what.

Thadred and the Istovari were already at work. Sair and Thadred worked together, the two of them lashing a brier to Lleuad. The small horse was the only animal that had been willing to come this close to the cythraul.

They were trying to use the kelpie to help carry the hurt and the wounded back to the top of the chasm, but the small horse pawed and stomped, ears flicking back and forth, staring toward the mouth of the mine.

A line of soldiers, four ranks deep, faced the mouth of the mine, guarding the entrance. Men muttered and cursed softly, a few spitting as they watched red eyes flicker from the darkness. Archers waited in the ranks of men, shooting into the shadows whenever the red eyes showed themselves.

Daindreth came up beside the soldiers, surrounded by his personal guards and most of Amira's rangers as well. He still held her hand and squeezed it one last time before he let it go.

"Who's the officer here?" Daindreth looked back and forth along the ranks.

“Lieutenant Cohin, Your Majesty.” A young man in a rounded helmet answered, bowing to the emperor. His face was smudged with dirt and all the soldiers had a film of dust over them, probably from the rockslide earlier.

“Good work, Lieutenant,” Daindreth said. “You’ve driven the creatures to ground.”

“They are tough. And they fight like, well, demons,” the young man answered. “But they aren’t that well-armed.”

Daindreth smiled wanly at the soldier. It was hard to know if that was vain bravado or not, but either way, these men had just beaten back the armies of the Dread Marches.

The cythraul hadn’t had much time to adjust to the mortal world. Perhaps if they’d had a few more weeks or months, they would have been fiercer, stronger, and more organized. Might they be even more formidable if given time?

Daindreth didn’t know and he didn’t want to find out. “Are we ready?” He looked to the lieutenant and then to Westfall.

The officers nodded, though Westfall made little effort to hide his frustration now.

Here came the hardest part of the hunt. They would have to go to ground and rout the cythraul out.

The earth grinned up at the imperials, a stone skull of black rock and rough-hewn edges.

“Your Majesty?”

Daindreth glanced to his wife, her expression concerned—cautious.

“There are perhaps thirty cythraul cowering directly in front of us. They’re lying still, probably waiting.” Amira craned her neck. “I can’t see them, so they’re most likely keeping their eyes closed in hopes of catching us by surprise.”

Daindreth didn’t like the sound of that, but he didn’t like any of this. As much as his muscles tensed and the hair on the

back of his neck stood on end, he knew this was right. He needed to delve into the earth with his men.

He needed the army—at least this part of it—to see he wasn't a coward. It wasn't just about proving it to himself, though that was a smaller part of it. He needed stories of this to spread. He needed the empire to see him as strong.

“Lieutenant.”

“Yes, Your Majesty?”

“When you are ready.” Daindreth inhaled a long breath and drew the sword at his side.

Swords were close-quarter weapons, more suited to the tight spaces of the mine. The soldiers closest to Daindreth also carried swords, but those at the edges kept their spears. Pages carrying torches appeared, standing between the soldiers.

Daindreth desperately feared the cythraul might try to cause another cave-in. The tunnels were reinforced for the most part, but the cythraul had proven they could collapse the road. Why not the mine itself? Even if it trapped them down here, they could always abandon their hosts and find new ones back on the surface.

Nonetheless, the headman of Mevanmar and the surviving miners from the town assured them that the mine would be nigh impossible to collapse. Daindreth hoped they were right.

The first of the soldiers began to march down into the maw of the earth.

“Cythraul to your left,” Amira called. “Maybe ten of them.”

The soldiers turned toward the darkness Amira had indicated. Bows and crossbows would be of little use here in the darkness, but they prodded at the dark with spears, reaching for the creatures.

Sure enough, yelps and snarls came from the shadows. The cythraul were close—too close.

The demons leapt up, opening their red eyes as they lunged for soldiers. Most never reached the men, falling beneath blows of spears before they reached the lines of armored soldiers.

Daindreth couldn't hear over the clank of weapons and the shouts of soldiers, but he spotted several sets of red eyes fleeing deeper into the caverns.

At his side, the soldiers and Amira were tense and coiled, hunting dogs ready to pounce.

The cythraul slavered and snarled like rabid animals, but they seemed more frightened now. Up until this point, they had only encountered unaware cities, defenseless villages, and vulnerable farms. Today they had encountered the armies of Erymaya.

"Vesha must expect us," Amira muttered, glancing from right to left. She too wore a helmet, a simple conical cap held on by a strap. She said the knights' helmets obscured her vision too much, which didn't make sense to Daindreth when she could sense *ka*.

The soldiers pressed farther and deeper into the darkness.

They reached the bottom of the main shaft, where the way branched off into several. More soldiers followed down after them along with a few of the guides from the town of Mevanmar.

They were mostly older men who had since retired from the mines, but a few of them were able-bodied workers who'd simply had the day off. An operation this large always had a few men not at work on any given day.

Those who hadn't been working that day were truly the lucky ones. Daindreth didn't want to imagine what those present had suffered.

The groups of soldiers split up with more men descending to guard the length of the main mineshaft. The goal was to secure it while also making sure that anyone who needed a hasty retreat could pass.

Amira glared at the passages leading in every direction and cursed. “They’ve split up,” she said. She pointed to the openings of the caves. “They’re leading us in six different directions.”

Daindreth considered that for a moment. “Where is the farthest cythraul?” he asked. By his thinking, the cythraul the farthest away would most likely be the ones with Vesha. The others were most likely a distraction.

Amira pointed to a shaft leading straight ahead. “Straight ahead.” She looked to one of their guides. “Do any of the side tunnels circle back around that way?”

“A few,” answered an older man with a day’s worth of stubble over his cheeks and chin. “It’s a long passage, though.”

Amira looked to Daindreth. “I think Vesha went straight ahead.”

Daindreth nodded. “Then we go straight ahead.”

Chapter Twenty-Three

Amira

Underground was a strange place. The salt mine wasn't sterile, nothing truly was, but the usual lichen and greenery and insects of the forest weren't here.

That made it easier to sense *ka*, but there was nothing that could have blocked the miasmic, stinging presence of the cythraul. There were countless of the creatures in clusters and a few straggling outliers. They crawled through the darkness and the veins of the earth.

Many of the passages were reinforced with massive wood beams. Everything was coated in crystalline white spines. According to their guide, anything left in the mines over time became coated in a sheen of salt crystals. That went for the walls, the beams, and farther down, the stalactites and stalagmites.

Amira kept her awareness of Daindreth keen, focusing on him, minding his nearness. This was it. If they could survive this, then they would survive. If they won this battle, then they *won*.

Amira's heart beat a firm staccato in her chest. Vesha would be close, but would her *ka* be that of a human or of a cythraul...or something else?

As they continued on their way, going deeper, ever deeper into the mine, a few cythraul tried to harass them from the shadows, but the soldiers fought them back easily.

Cythraul were not so frightening when they had inferior weapons, and the soldiers were ready for them. One soldier sustained a few claw marks and several took bruises when the cythraul tried to beat them with stones, but the imperial armor held.

The soldiers would be sore, but not much worse.

They kept their guide at the center of their group, protected from the cythraul. As they crawled along through the dark depths of the chasm, Amira could feel the cythraul's burning presence growing brighter ahead.

Daindreth was also kept to the center, which meant Amira stayed there as well. "Did you know anyone in the mine, Master Griff?"

Griff was the miner serving as their party's guide. He was perhaps in his fifties and moved with a slight limp, an accident several years ago, he'd said, but he swore he still knew this mine better than anyone alive.

"My two boys," Griff answered, tone solemn. "Two of my grandsons and a granddaughter."

Amira stayed focused on the hunt, but hearing that, her heart gave a little pang. Yet another loss to be laid at Vesha's feet.

"There may still be survivors," Daindreth offered.

"You're kind, Your Majesty." The resignation in the older man's voice was almost palpable. "I fear the mine may be generous with her bounty, but she is not known for giving back what she takes."

For several long moments, there was nothing but the shuffling of soldiers and the crunching of rocks. Amira tried to focus on using *ka* rather than her eyes. The torches flickered unsteadily and looking directly at them was blinding in the dark.

"Thank you for helping us, Master Griff," Daindreth said. "I hope we find your sons and grandchildren."

Amira couldn't help but think of an old woman she once met as a girl in Hylendale. The woman claimed to be in her late nineties, having outlived her brothers, sisters, two husbands, four children, and six grandchildren. That meant she had reverse inherited all their land, modest as the estates were. People in the fief had remarked on what a lucky old widow she was, but when Amira had spoken to the woman, she hadn't

been able to stop wondering if perhaps the old matron would have preferred to die young and let her children grow old instead.

When the matron had finally passed, allegedly at the age of one hundred and seven, many people had come from across the fief and the surrounding countryside, including many distant relatives, but no immediate family.

Most people lived surrounded by death, infused with the stink of it. You could die young, or you could live to see your children and perhaps even their children die.

That was the way it had always been, until...

This had been what Vesha had wanted to stop. She had wanted to make the empire safer, more stable, a place where children could grow old and funerals could be crowded with grandchildren who had lived to mourn their grandparents.

Amira begrudgingly admitted to herself it had been an admirable goal. Too bad Vesha had gone about it the wrong way.

Amira stepped carefully, watching her toes. Her sorceress' sight might tell her where living things were, but it was less helpful with stones. Good thing she'd had practice sneaking about in the dark long before she'd learned to use her magic.

They entered a large cavern, littered with bits of discarded rock and pieces of salt stones. The floor had been carefully excavated flat.

Amira had always thought mining sounded like a brutal and haphazard profession. When she pictured mines, she pictured men clawing at the earth like starving animals, tearing up chunks as they were able.

What she saw here was far more deliberate. It was not so much the mad hacking she had imagined, but more like a butcher's careful, deliberate cuts. Much thought had been put into this mine, generations of it. Most miners were respectable, well-paid workmen and the artistry of their craft showed.

Up ahead, a disturbance in the lines of *ka* caught her attention. Amira cocked her head, soaking in the sensations of life.

“Cythraul ahead,” Amira warned the men. “Quite a few of them.” She looked up, frowning. “Are there any passages that lead over us?” She looked pointedly to Griff.

He shook his head. “No, my lady.”

“Look up!”

As soon as Amira gave warning, the red eyes of cythraul flashed overhead. At least twenty of the creatures had somehow crawled onto the roof of the cavern. Amira had no idea what they could be holding onto, but they clung there like spiders.

The men huddled together, weapons out, torches up high so as not to blind each other.

Amira tracked Daindreth, keeping him close at her back.

Westfall guarded his opposite side, shouting orders to the men.

The cythraul clung to the ceiling, grinning, but making no move to attack just yet.

At Amira’s other side, Griff muttered prayers to Gwydrun, the god of smiths and those who work the earth.

“More are coming,” Amira warned, hoping Eponine still favored her.

The soldiers stayed close together, on guard, but not moving. If they tried to move on, the cythraul could drop down and flank them. But as they were, they had no way to get the creatures down.

Ahead, the cavern’s exit led the way down toward the *ka* Amira assumed to be Vasha. But it was possible that some of the creatures had put their hosts back in control to hide their presence from her.

The lean figure of a woman filled the far exit of the cavern, blocking their path down. The figure faced them with red eyes glittering out of a wan face.

Amira felt an involuntary shudder at the sight of the creature, and she couldn't quite figure out why. They had at least twenty of the demons ready to drop on their heads. She studied this new cythraul head to foot and then she realized what it was.

The woman's hair was drawn back in a tight bun. Her mouth was a straight line, her shoulders back and feet shoulder width apart, hands behind her back. Her clothes would have been nothing unusual anywhere else, but here, seeing a cythraul with a shirt laced to the throat and trousers tucked into her boots was downright eerie.

Of all the cythraul they had seen this far, this one was the most...ordered.

"What do you want?" Westfall demanded. His voice didn't shake. He was brave, Amira would give him that.

The cythraul didn't respond, instead looking up to the others now hanging over their heads.

Amira considered the demon. "Araa Oon?"

The cythraul blocking their path snapped its head straight to her.

Amira smirked at the creature. "Eponine sends her regards."

The cythraul cocked his head to the side. At least, Amira thought the demon must be a *he*. The voice was decidedly male when it spoke. "The Istovari sorceress. The witch has told me much of you."

"Where is my mother?" Daindreth demanded.

The cythraul cocked its head toward Daindreth. Amira had encountered only a handful of cythraul, but the emotionless, bland expression of this one felt decidedly wrong even for one of them. "She still wants you alive. I am supposed to obey her,

but..." Araa Oon looked to the ceiling. "My first duty is to my own mother."

A cythraul who understood duty? This was something new indeed.

"They're stalling," Amira muttered to Daindreth. "He's trying to keep us here."

Daindreth's expression was impossible to read from inside his helmet. "Yes," he agreed.

"I think I can sense Vesha that way." Amira gestured toward the path blocked by Araa Oon. "There are more cythraul nearby, but there's quite a bit of *ka* that's *not* cythraul ahead of us, too."

"There's a lake down there," Griff said quietly, keeping remarkably good composure for a man encountering demons for the first time.

"A lake?" Amira had studied the map thoroughly these past days and she didn't remember anything about a lake.

"An underground lake," Griff said. "It's saltwater, but it goes for hundreds of paces between the stones."

Amira wasn't sure, but she had a feeling Vesha was headed toward it. That might be where they could cut her off.

"Something's coming," Amira muttered. "Fast. It's—"

At least a dozen pigs came squealing out from behind Araa Oon. As soon as they cleared the demon, their eyes washed red, just as Thadred had described.

The demonic animals smashed into the legs of the nearest soldiers, taking spear wounds as they did. One of the soldiers stumbled back into Amira, nearly knocking her over. She struggled to keep her footing, knowing if she went down here chances of getting trampled were exceptionally high.

Cythraul dropped from the ceiling, smashing onto soldiers and pinning men to the ground. The soldiers around them

swarmed to hack apart the attacking demons and rescue their friends, but torches fell, and everything was chaos.

Amira wanted to close her eyes and use *ka* to guide her, but spears swung in every direction. Several men drew swords as the cythraul closed in. Amira had to dodge just to keep from being stabbed by one of their own soldiers.

A cythraul tackled her to the ground, a scrawny boy who was far stronger than any mortal could have been. He clawed at her throat, mouth wet and slavering.

Amira had been drawing *ka* into herself for hours, preparing for just this situation. Channeling a surge of power through her arm and shoulder, she stabbed her dagger through his skull. His eyes flickered black and his demonic *ka* winked out before she shoved him off.

A cythraul in a female body lunged for a soldier's exposed back and Amira grabbed the end of the woman's matted braid. Cythraul might be unnaturally strong, but they were still subject to the earthly laws. The creature's head snapped back too hard and Amira felt a crack.

Head at a crooked angle, the monster whirled around, teeth flashing and hands clawing. Amira jabbed her dagger straight into the woman's breastbone. Nails scraped her cheek and Amira was aware of a flash of hot pain, but she ignored it.

The cythraul wriggled and writhed as it collapsed at her feet. The creature howled, clutching at its wound. The eyes flickered, then dimmed. In an instant, what was left on the ground was a whimpering woman, gasping and sobbing.

Amira looked away. The cythraul had fled and the host was dying. She had bigger things to worry about now.

The assassin ducked as another blow came for her head. A stone struck her back as one of the cythraul pounced. They must be able to see in the dark. Not really a surprise.

The creature smashed a rock into her helmet and Amira had never been more grateful for the padding underneath. A soldier shouted, spearing the cythraul and lifting it off her.

Amira didn't get the chance to thank the soldier before another cythraul dropped from the ceiling, narrowly missing her. Amira channeled *ka* into the creature's chest.

Channeling spells was still hard for her without physical contact, but she blasted power into the creature's chest cavity. Something crunched inside, not audible, but visible to a sorceress' senses.

The creature's eyes flickered and it toppled over gasping, too. The wiry old man who had been the host collapsed on the ground writhing.

Amira had often wished people died faster. It would make it easier for everyone involved.

A squeal was Amira's only warning before a possessed hog knocked a soldier over, sending the knight smashing straight into her.

Amira cursed, rolling out of the way and trying to drag the soldier with her. She sensed hot *ka* rolling down his leg. He was injured. Grabbing the soldier by the back of his armor, she channeled into him, hoping it would dull his pain if not heal his wound.

The pig came squealing after them, making her ears ring with screams. Light flashed as the torches were kicked, blocked, and hurled out of the way. Daindreth shouted, but Amira didn't see from where.

Only *ka* could guide Amira now. She closed her eyes, forcing herself to focus.

She could feel the dying hosts at their feet, blood hot and burning. The soldiers surrounded her, wrestling with the cythraul as much as sparring with them.

Several soldiers clustered around another figure that must be Daindreth.

A cythraul made to pounce and Amira dodged, narrowly avoiding the soldier to her left. She sliced the cythraul's arm as it passed, then grabbed the wound with her free hand.

This host was just a man, an ordinary man. He had no magic of his own to draw on, but just like with Darrigan, Amira recognized that there was a line where the cythraul ended and the host began. A cythraul was just a parasite. The life, the power of the host remained no matter what the cythraul might do.

Amira drew hard on that power, her own much stronger magic dragging it out in great draughts.

The cythraul hissed, spinning around. Clawed hands came up to grab her face and Amira *pushed*.

She shoved the power of the host's life force back into the parasite. In the moment, she had a vague thought that she shouldn't risk this, that she didn't know what might happen.

Then the cythraul screamed. The creature writhed and shook and then it collapsed, shaking and convulsing.

Amira held onto the wounded arm, forcing the host's *ka* into the creature. She felt the miasmatic, toxic taint of the cythraul's energy fade. The demonic power was purged.

Not waiting to see what had happened to the host, Amira stabbed for the next cythraul. This one she caught square in the mouth, knife punching out the back of its throat. She yanked her blade free and kicked at the next attacker that came clawing at her back.

Something large came in their direction. Voices rose and pigs screamed and then a massive shape swooped over Amira.

There was a clatter and a crash as white eyes flashed frighteningly close to Amira's face. She scrambled back and stabbed another cythraul as she did.

Gauntleted hands seized her and dragged her back.

"Amira!" Daindreth caught her, grabbing her roughly in his haste. "Are you alright?"

Amira blinked, realizing Westfall had dragged her out of the fray. "Fine."

The screams died down and shapes fled into the dark of the cavern.

Amira's head rang with the noise, but she spun about, realizing she could understand words again. "What...?"

The bodies of cythraul hosts lay scattered on the ground amid the dropped torches. A few soldiers lay injured, but for the most part their armor had saved them from the creatures. They felt alive to Amira, at least for now.

Over them all, a knight on a little black horse stood towering over the wreckage of bodies. Thadred sat in full armor with a sword in one hand.

Lleuad had no bridle and was chomping on one of the dead pigs. Amira didn't need to see Thadred's face to know he was grinning with pride.

"Did you know these mines used to be worked by ponies?" Thadred's visor creaked as he pushed it back. "All the shafts were designed to fit them."

"That is true." It was Griff, the retired miner. He stood holding a pickaxe like a shield. He had a cut on his temple and Amira could sense the blood dripping down his face, but he seemed to be fine.

"You were supposed to be helping with the wounded," Daindreth said, sounding annoyed.

"I was. Then we heard screaming." Thadred made no move to dismount, but no move to turn back, either. "I think it was the pigs." As he spoke, Lleuad kicked at one of the dead animals.

Amira took deep breaths, taking stock of her body. She felt fine, if a little jarred. "Vesha is getting away." She could feel the empress's presence like a beacon, slipping out of reach. "We need to move."

"Don't let me stop you." Thadred made a sweeping gesture toward the mine shaft.

Amira reached for Daindreth in the shadows. Not for any particular reason, she just wanted to touch him.

Daindreth's heavily armored arm pulled her close. "I don't think..."

A groan came from the ground.

Lleuad spun on one of the moving bodies, teeth bared in a way that was not at all horselike.

A young man rolled over, one of the cythraul hosts, but... not cythraul. At least no cythraul energy Amira could sense.

He held his hands up, palms flat. "Please," he whispered. "Please, I don't...don't..."

Thadred raised his sword. After the trick outside the mine, Amira didn't blame him.

"Wait." Amira took a sharp step forward.

"Please." The host was a young man, so filthy, bloody, and so battered that he was barely recognizable as human. "I don't...Paav Noor is gone. I swear. She...she purged him."

Amira cocked her head, studying the stranger. She knew she'd done something. Somehow, she had crushed the life force of the cythraul. She'd assumed that she had killed the host in the process, but it seemed she hadn't.

"Rell!" Griff exclaimed, crashing into the other man. "Boy, I thought we'd lost you."

The freed host trembled, clinging to the old miner. "I thought you had, too."

"Where are your brother and cousin? Your father and uncle?" Griff's voice had been steady until now, but now a note of desperation slipped in.

"I don't know," the boy, Rell, confessed. "We were separated." He looked to Amira, trembling. "Thank you."

Amira had been about to demand that they bind the boy's hands in case his eyes turned red again, but that felt awkward.

“You should go back up,” she said instead. “Let us deal with this.” She’d rather have him surrounded by armed soldiers in broad daylight if he happened to become possessed again.

“Let me stay with you.” Rell looked up at his grandfather. “Let me help search for the rest of our family.”

Amira bit her lip. Something felt off, but she couldn’t quite put it to words. She didn’t know enough about fighting cythraul just yet. “What bargain did you strike?” Amira clipped. “Cythraul need bargains to possess their hosts.”

“There was no bargain,” Rell said. His voice stuttered, but Amira didn’t know him well enough to know if that meant he was lying.

There had to be a bargain with someone. Even Daindreth’s possession had been because of a bargain.

“You can stay with us, but keep under the light of the torches,” Daindreth ordered. He looked to Thadred. “Can you help take the wounded up top?”

Thadred nodded, grimacing. “I suppose.” Something in the way he said it told Amira he wouldn’t be long gone. “I’ll be back with more men.”

Daindreth nodded, more in acceptance than approval, Amira guessed.

There was no time to waste, so the emperor and his party delved deeper into the mines while Thadred helped a few of the more badly wounded back up top.

All the way, Amira could sense the tainted *ka* of the cythraul bright and burning before them, leading the way into the dark.

“There are more of them ahead,” Amira warned. “I think their leader is having them regroup deeper down the passage.”

“This is the passage that leads to the lake,” said Griff. “Sure as I live and breathe.”

Their group had relit their torches and Amira kept close beside Daindreth. She pulled in more *ka*, concentrating it on the places where she's been bruised or cut.

"Are you sure you're alright?" Daindreth asked, voice soft at her side.

"Yes, love," she assured him. "Yes, I'm fine."

Daindreth touched the small of her back. That was all, but with that simple gesture, she felt his care, his concern.

It occurred to her then that perhaps he didn't want to live without her any more than she wanted to live without him. She'd always seen it as foolish when people talked like that.

But now...with Daindreth, she'd found more peace, safety, and daresay comfort than she had since being sacrificed as a child. If losing him meant going back to the way her life had been before, then losing him was the greater evil.

Chapter Twenty-Four

Vesha

Vesha heard the clank and clatter back down the tunnels. Squeals and screams echoed along the stone and every step she took, the hunters seemed to be just at her heels.

Shaking, Vesha stumbled along with the guidance of her god-eye. The screams echoed too loudly even for her to hear Caa Iss' bullying. She trembled, not wanting to hear the screams, but having no choice. How could something she couldn't even see be so loud?

Just as soon as it had begun, silence descended on the cave once again. Voices murmured quietly and then the soft rattle of men in armor.

Vesha felt like a child again, running from monsters in the dark. Even though she knew that a far worse horror walked by her side, fear of the men at her back drove her on.

Footsteps came racing through the dark, faster and faster. Vesha stumbled, tripping and falling on loose stones in her haste. The ceiling of this chamber spanned high above, out of sight.

Vesha choked on terror as the clatter of hooves came racing after them. She broke into a run, then stumbled and fell, skidding on the stones. Pain flared through her hands and jarred her knees. Whimpering, Vesha clawed to her feet again.

"It's just Araa Oon," Caa Iss muttered.

Vesha spun around, heart in her throat. Then she wished she hadn't. It wasn't the knights and soldiers of her son she had feared, it was worse.

Araa Oon jogged out of the shadows, followed by a contingent of cythraul in human and pig bodies alike. His hair had escaped from its bun and wisped around his face in feral strands. Even Araa Oon was losing control in the chaos.

“They’re right behind us,” Araa Oon warned. He looked to the looming figure of Caa Iss. “We can buy you some time, but maybe a few minutes at most.”

Caa Iss made a rumbling sound in his throat. “You moved too slow,” he snarled at Vesha.

Shame poured into Vesha’s thoughts. She was useless, worthless, weak, pitiful...

“No time for that,” Araa Oon snapped, as if reading her expression. “The Mirror is just ahead. I heard them talking. Go. We will hold them off for as long as we can.”

“Mother will reward you for your service,” Caa Iss rumbled.

Araa Oon had no comment for that. “Go. Time is short.”

“They’ll kill our hosts!” wheedled one of the nearby cythraul. “We can’t get past their armor!”

“I don’t want to go back!” whined another of the creatures. “Not the Dread Marches! We were just freed!”

Araa Oon let off a primal, animal snarl that didn’t match his human face at all. “Mother will free us all again once she is loosed.”

“But if we fail,” whimpered another. “If we fail, she will punish us.”

“If we flee now,” another rasped, “we may be able to keep these bodies. If we hide in the mortal world—”

“If you flee, Mother will know of your betrayal when she is freed,” Araa Oon hissed.

Vesha left Araa Oon to wrangle the other cythraul. She wondered why Moreyne hadn’t made more of her children like Araa Oon, or even all of them. He was Master of the Hunt and seemed to be the most effective. Why not make every single cythraul like him?

Vesha stumbled onward through the darkness. Caa Iss lumbered alongside her, hissing encouragements and angry

japes in equal measure.

She didn't know how long she pressed on. It seemed to her that she'd already been down here for hours. The way twisted and knotted. Neither the cythraul nor Vesha had any real knowledge of the mines.

Vesha leaned against the wall of the cave for support. Her footsteps echoed too loudly to her ears. All around her, she could feel the weight of the earth above. There was no sky. Not even a sliver of the heavens could be seen here.

In the cave was true darkness. Not the darkness of the night, but the darkness of a world deprived even of stars.

Stars. How she ached for the stars. To see them again. With her own eyes. To breathe in their scent.

Vesha had never thought of stars as having a scent before, no more than she had considered colors having a scent.

But no, she could remember it. A memory trickled to her as if from far, far away, farther back than her own memory could have possibly reached.

Stars smelled clean, pure. They were crisp and white-hot, burning away everything that came too close.

Vesha swallowed, staring ahead with her god-eye. She could see a passage before her, leading down, down deeper into the earth.

“What is it now?” Caa Iss demanded.

“Do you remember the smell of stars, Caa Iss?”

The cythraul, for all his nagging and grating these past hours, went silent for a moment. His wings shuffled in that nervous way they sometimes did. “No.”

“I do.” Vesha continued down the passage, not sure what she would find at the end. Light came from ahead, pale blue and not unlike starlight.

Vesha stepped through a large cleft in the stone, large enough that Caa Iss was able to step through after her without

folding his wings.

A massive cavern stretched before her. The ceiling rose over them only perhaps twenty feet or so, not particularly high, but the chamber stretched off as far as she could see. Stalactites and stalagmites met, supporting the ceiling like massive, jagged pillars.

At first, she thought the glowing floor was sheeted in glass, until she stepped to the edge, and it stirred.

Water. Still and calm, undisturbed by the wind or underground currents. The water mirrored the ceiling, making it seem that the cavern gaped endlessly in both directions.

“It’s the salt in the water,” Caa Iss said. “So much, it creates a perfect reflection.”

Vesha looked down. She could see herself for the first time since arriving on the mainland. Really see herself.

One eye was larger than the other, stuffed into her skull. Around the edges of the alien eye, the skin was red and puckered, a scarred, irritated line of flesh.

The rest of her face was sallow, skin hanging off her. It occurred to Vesha that she hadn’t eaten in...perhaps days? When was the last time that Odette had all but force-fed her?

Her clothes hung in tatters, barely recognizable from the day dress it had been. Dirt and bloody scratches covered her exposed skin. Tearing through the forest had not gone well for her, and neither had blundering through this cave.

Biting her lip, Vesha studied her reflection. Caa Iss loomed over her shoulder, his mutilated face with its twisted shape somehow matched her own. It matched her perfectly.

As she looked down, a crushing weight of self-hatred and self-loathing pressed on her shoulders. She collapsed to her knees, staring at her own face.

The water began to glow, faintly at first. So faintly she thought she imagined it. Then the watery Mirror shimmered, writhing and swirling.

A breath went through the cavern, the whisper of a familiar voice. There were no distinguishable words, but Vesha knew that voice. She would never forget it.

“Yes,” Caa Iss purred. His serpentine tail swished as he tilted his head back. “Yes, Mother. Welcome, great one.”

Vesha watched her reflection as it began to glow. It shone brighter and brighter by the moment.

Vesha looked into the god-eye and it stared back. Then her reflection changed. The god-eye shrank to a normal size while her other eye shimmered to match it. Her reflection smiled at her, too-sharp teeth flashing white.

Vesha shuddered and pulled back.

Caa Iss was speaking again. “Are you pleased, Mother? Have I done well?” He sounded oddly nervous, not at all the cocky, confident monster Vesha knew him to be. “I know I have made mistakes, but look...after these thousands of years...you are free again!”

Vesha looked away, realization setting in. Moreyne would rule through her. She'd known that. Moreyne would possess her. A part of her had known. A part of her had always known.

“What are you doing?” Caa Iss turned around. “Come here. Get in the water,” he ordered. “You need to step in the water.”

Caa Iss was nervous. He was afraid. That meant it wasn't too late. Vesha met the demon's gaze. Caa Iss watched her, nostrils flaring with impatience.

Pain shot through Vesha's skull. A voice boomed through her head.

“Get in the water,” the voice commanded. “Return my eye.”

Vesha collapsed on the dirt, gasping and choking as pain stabbed through her skull.

“Why do you make me hurt you?” Moreyne demanded. “Why do you disobey me? Don't you want me to save your

empire? Don't you want me to save your people?"

Vesha clutched at the side of her head, curling in on herself. It felt as if an iron spike was being driven through her skull. Pain, pain, pain.

All she wanted in that moment was an end. All she wanted was to rip it out.

So she did.

Chapter Twenty-Five

Amira

Amira felt the power shift in the air. An involuntary shudder went through her.

There were cythraul ahead, but that wasn't a cythraul. Not *just* a cythraul, anyway.

"Something is wrong," she said, glancing to Daindreth. "There's power up ahead. Power that's...wrong." She wished she could explain it better.

At her back, Thadred perched atop Lleuad. "Yes," the knight agreed. His tension was all but audible. "Something's very wrong."

"The cythraul are waiting," Amira said. "I think they're forming another ambush."

Westfall made a grunting noise. "Be ready, men. How many?"

Amira tried to tell the shapes of cythraul apart. Sometimes, when sources of *ka* were too close together, the distinctions could blur. "Not sure," she muttered. "Maybe twenty?"

Lleuad let off a snort. That little horse was constantly spoiling for a fight. The little animal seemed to have no sense of self-preservation when it came to cythraul.

A scream rattled through the cavern. It was a woman's voice, not a cythraul's.

"Mother," Daindreth stiffened at Amira's side. "That's Vesha."

The scream carried on, broken and choked. It came from past the cythraul. Several of the cythraul shifted, as if to investigate, but then they turned their attention back to the front.

It was a scream of agony, of unknown pain. Amira hated the woman and had imagined making her scream in exactly that same way, but this made Amira's chest clench. What could be hurting Vesha like that?

Up ahead, light flickered. It was a blue light, like nothing Amira had seen before. The strange lights licked along the stone, dancing and rippling.

“What the—?” Amira never got to finish her question. “Watch out!”

Cythraul swarmed from the shadows. But not as many of them as there had been the last time.

In the dark, the cythraul were backlit by the light ahead. The light was greater than that of the torches, flickering too brightly.

After the near total darkness of the cavern, it was blinding.

Cythraul slammed into the soldiers. They crashed into the ranks with snarls and hisses.

Amira tried to fend them off, wielding her sword and magic at the same time. Everything was chaos.

Imperial soldiers did best in ranks, but it was impossible to hold ranks in this madness. The uneven ground and the low light were a challenge as it was. Amira felt her way by the power of *ka* as much as sight, more and more by the moment.

“Sorceress.” The rasping, seething voice of Araa Oon had no contempt, no rage.

Instead of turning around, Amira rolled forward. An axe chopped through the air over her an instant later. If she'd turned around, she would have caught that full in the face.

Amira backed up to give herself space, dagger in one hand and sword in the other.

Araa Oon faced her, long fingers wrapped around the length of a sledgehammer. Araa Oon took her in with a

focused intensity. This creature didn't radiate hatred the way Caa Iss did.

Araa Oon wouldn't toy with her. He wouldn't torture her. No, he'd smash her skull in first chance he got.

Around them, soldiers wrestled with other cythraul. She'd lost track of Daindreth but didn't dare look away from Araa Oon.

"Are you a prince?" Amira asked, trying to stall while she thought of something. "A cythraul prince?"

"I am the Hunter." Araa Oon swung for her again.

Amira leapt backward, out of reach. Maces, axes, and other similar weapons were usually lethal when they struck and nearly impossible to block without a shield. They were outrageously heavy and hard to stop. That was ironically both their greatest strength and their greatest weakness.

Araa Oon smashed the sledgehammer into a stalagmite, missing Amira a second time. A rain of salt crystals burst from where he had struck.

"Come on," Amira taunted. "Surely you can do better."

Araa Oon blinked at her.

Another cythraul tried to lunge for her side, but a soldier intercepted it, tackling the creature to the ground. Amira didn't have time to thank the man before Araa Oon charged her again.

Araa Oon jabbed the sledgehammer at her, striking out like it was a spear.

Amira was forced to fall back again. This cythraul knew how to use weapons, not just claws and teeth like most of them.

Amira remembered Saan Thii and how that cythraul had preferred spears, too. She assumed it was a tactical decision at the time, but perhaps there was more to it.

Again, Araa Oon charged, and Amira realized he was driving her back, away from the lake that shone ahead. Amira jerked her chin toward the blue light.

“She’s that way, isn’t she? Vesha.”

Araa Oon didn’t answer. He swung at her again. He was driving Amira away, backing her toward the far wall of the cave.

Amira cursed at the cythraul, using words to make Thadred proud. The cythraul didn’t react at all. All the demons were unsettling by their nature, but this creature’s apathy was new kind of eerie.

Amira let Araa Oon take a few more swipes, dodging them as they came. He struck at her legs and instead of retreating, she jumped and charged.

Amira stabbed for the cythraul’s side.

He spun back, veering out of the way. His arms went wide as he skirted out of her reach again.

Amira had been so close to striking him. So close.

While the soldiers were fighting the other cythraul to the ground, Amira and Araa Oon had yet to scratch each other.

Lleuad’s shrill whinny echoed through the cavern. Thadred’s shouts rose above the fray, calling orders to soldiers as they chopped down cythraul left and right.

They were going to win.

“You’re losing,” Amira said. “You must know that. Your brothers and sisters are being chopped down like chaff.”

Araa Oon blinked at her. He paused and Amira thought he would respond, then he jabbed for her again.

Amira fell back with a hearty curse, dodging behind a stalagmite to avoid his next swing.

He struck at one side and Amira swung around behind the stone and rushed him. She stabbed for his heart, but the

creature twisted to the side and her sword punched into his shoulder.

Amira drove her sword deeper and wrenched to the side, using *ka* to add more force to the weapon. Cythraul healed freakishly fast, but they couldn't heal around a blade that was still in them.

Araa Oon snarled for the first time, left arm dropping to his side. Something cracked as Amira tore cartilage and bone with her sword.

Araa Oon dropped his sledgehammer and grabbed her arm with his free hand, teeth flashing.

Amira wrenched sideways and flipped him over her back, thankful that she and his host were about the same size.

Araa Oon smacked onto the stone and Amira scrambled to get on top of him. She'd lost the grip on her sword, but it was still embedded in his shoulder.

Amira kicked the blade, bracing one foot against it. He was still stronger, but he was on the ground and now only had one working arm.

She stabbed her dagger for his ribs, but Araa Oon grabbed her wrist. Any shoving match with the cythraul would end badly for her. Instead of pushing against him, she pushed sideways, sending both their hands down with the dagger gripped between them.

"Now," Amira snarled, pressing her free hand around the sword, over the bleeding wound in his chest. "Get out."

Amira dragged on the strength of Araa Oon's host. The lanky woman's life force seeped out between her fingers, fueling all the power Amira needed.

The sorceress slammed her power into the smoky presence that was Araa Oon. Instantly, she realized she'd underestimated him. Araa Oon was stronger than that other cythraul had been, far stronger. He was easily an equal to Caa Iss or Saan Thii. But Amira was committed.

Amira poured power into the demon. Her power, flowing from Eponine, clashed with the demon's, flowing from Moreyne.

The cythraul writhed in her grip. He shook, but he didn't snarl and hiss the way most of them did.

This one was different. This one was...

As Amira's own awareness crashed into Araa Oon, she realized how different he was. He was every bit as much a demon as any of the others and he was every bit as wrong, but it was more than that.

Where the others felt like a smoky inferno, Araa Oon was the ashes left behind. He wasn't burning. He had already burned out. What was he?

Araa Oon rolled, pinning her under him. Amira locked her legs with his, keeping him close. His chest bled onto her as his wound was unable to close, his blood pouring down in bright red ribbons.

His hand clamped around Amira's neck and squeezed with far more strength than what should have been in that narrow woman's body.

Amira forced herself not to fight his hand. Every instinct in her screamed that she should protect her throat, but she wouldn't be able to beat him on strength. She knew that.

One hand went to the sword still sticking out his shoulder, right where it joined his chest. She twisted it as hard as she could while her other hand snaked down.

Araa Oon hissed in pain as she wrenched the blade, his hand giving just a little.

Amira yanked out a second dagger from her belt and poured as much *ka* as she could muster into her arm. She drove it deep into the cythraul's ribs. The creature's body shuddered.

Araa Oon gasped and blood spat out his mouth.

Amira shoved his hand off her throat, sucking in a great gulp of air. She kneed him, hard, but didn't see exactly what she hit.

The cythraul staggered. He collapsed to the ground, but pushed himself up onto one arm, twisting around to face her again.

Amira picked up her dropped dagger and shoved the creature over. Araa Oon stared up at her with bright orange eyes, face absolutely unreadable. Amira grabbed the cythraul's hair and yanked his head back. She slammed her dagger up under his chin, straight into his skull.

The cythraul's whole body shuddered and shook, then the eyes winked out and the body went limp. The fleeting image of a bent and mangled figure flashed before Amira.

She could have sworn the creature watched her as it flickered out of sight, vanishing into thin air.

Amira was left holding the bloody, brutalized corpse of a gaunt woman. The woman stared sightlessly ahead, eyes empty, glassy. She had been perhaps forty. Lines had begun forming around her eyes and mouth and just a bit of grey at her temples.

Panting, Amira pulled her blades free of the corpse. She didn't regret killing the woman and banishing Araa Oon, but she wasn't feeling triumphant, either.

"Amira!" Thadred's voice bellowed from her back.

Lleuad came barreling toward her, skidding to a stop on the rocks.

Amira looked up to the knight, then past him to where the soldiers were picking over the bodies of the dead cythraul.

"Dain sent me to find you," Thadred panted. "We've found Vesha."

Amira cast around in a sharp circle. "Where is he?"

Thadred nodded, pulling on Lleuad's reins. "This way."

Chapter Twenty-Six

Daindreth

Daindreth had lost Amira in the fray. He'd sent Thadred to find her, but she was alive. He knew it. She had to be.

In front of him, he could see the lake Griff had told them about. It shimmered and sparked blue, not still at all. The surface fairly churned with the promise of power, with the promise of suffering.

At the water's edge, was his mother.

Vesha doubled over, sobbing on the ground, holding her face. Dark stains splotched her clothes and hands. Blood.

Looming over her, roaring and cursing and clawing at the ground was Caa Iss. The massive demon abandoned all dignity, wings flapping and claws scraping. Daindreth recognized that look. The cythraul was furious.

"My liege, it's not safe." Westfall made to block his path. "Please, my lord." There was an edge to Westfall's tone. Genuine pleading.

Daindreth looked on as Caa Iss pinned down his mother. The demon had caused so much pain to their family. So much suffering to his father, his mother, his wife, and his people. "Can you see him?" Daindreth demanded, gripping Westfall's arm.

"Your Majesty?"

"The demon standing over her."

Westfall looked back. "I see your mother, my liege. But she has power. Let me call the soldiers."

Daindreth looked back. The fighting was dying down, his men standing over the corpses of cythraul. They were winning.

Westfall called the men and the soldiers formed into ranks at Daindreth's back.

The water shimmered and churned, writhing like a bed of snakes. Something was wrong—something more than the obvious. Caa Iss was too angry, almost panicked. Normally, that would be a good thing, but Caa Iss became reckless when he was the angriest.

The cythraul pawed at her, not able to touch. He roared in her face, his impotent rage ferocious all the same.

Vesha whimpered, trying to pull back.

“Let her go!” Daindreth ordered.

Caa Iss’ head swung around. “She’s mine, archduke,” the cythraul screamed. “Mine!”

“That’s emperor to you,” Daindreth shot back.

This was the first time Daindreth had faced Caa Iss since being freed of the monster. The thing he’d feared for most of his life, the thing that had defined him for so, so long.

Daindreth didn’t remember what life had been like before the demon, only that there *had* been a life before the demon. He remembered his father and being a child, but he didn’t remember what it had been *like*.

“You’ve taken enough from us, creature,” Daindreth said. “You’re going back to the Dread Marches where you belong.”

Caa Iss slavered, great head shaking. “Vesha is mine now! She made a deal! She agreed to it!”

At the demon’s feet, Vesha wept in a tattered, filthy ball. She didn’t speak.

“And what was that deal?” Daindreth demanded. “Protection for the empire? Safety?” Daindreth knew his mother well enough to guess. “You have *broken* that deal, demon. You are your kind have brought us nothing but bloodshed and slaughter. You *broke your bargain*.”

Caa Iss snarled. “It’s not that easy, archduke,” the demon cursed. “Saan Thii might have abandoned her, but she is still

my witch. Mine!” Caa Iss repeated the word like he was trying to convince himself.

Daindreth leveled his sword at the cythraul, though it might not do any good against an incorporeal creature. “I don’t care.”

Chapter Twenty-Seven

Vesha

Vesha lay on the ground, sobbing. She could feel an empty, bloody socket where the god-eye had been. Pain consumed the entire half of her face, making tears well in her other eye.

Caa Iss had just been shouting at her, swearing to jam the god-eye back in. Then he stopped.

Voices clamored. Someone screamed. The cythraul yelled and voices shook the cavern. She swore the water lapped louder, like the swirling depths were trying to suck her down to whatever lay below.

Caa Iss spoke to someone. Vesha didn't see who, nor did she look up.

Vesha breathed, feeling the blood pour down her face and drip, drip into the sand.

The portal had weakened ever since she'd torn the eye out, yet the veil was still thin. She could feel Moreyne on the other side, fighting to get through—but unable. The goddess didn't have permission.

Vesha had broken the bargain. Lying on the dirt, she didn't care what was happening above or around her.

Whatever happened now, it wasn't her concern. She had the chance to save the world, but she hadn't been strong enough. Thanks to her, famines would come. Floods. Civil wars.

She hadn't been strong enough to stop them. She hadn't been powerful enough to bring the cythraul to heel.

It was over. All over. And she had failed.

“Mother.”

Vesha laid still, thinking it must be one of the cythraul.

“Mother, can you hear me?”

Someone touched her and Vesha recoiled.

“Mama. It’s me.”

The hand rolled her over and Vesha forced open her remaining eye.

It took a moment for her to focus, her depth perception off. The first thing she saw was his armor, then his dirty, smudged face. But it was Daindreth.

He knelt beside her, surrounded by soldiers, and though Caa Iss clawed and batted at Daindreth, he couldn’t touch him.

“You will pay for this!” Caa Iss roared. “All of you!”

“Shut up,” snapped a female voice. “And piss off!” That must be Amira.

There were soldiers here. That would mean Daindreth had just fought his way through the caverns to stop her. He would kill her, then. Vesha wasn’t entirely sad at that thought. She was tired. In pain. And ready for it to be over.

Daindreth’s face darkened at the sight of her. “Will you break your bargain with the cythraul?” He sounded desperate, almost pleading.

Vesha swallowed. “Yes,” she choked. “I…” she shuddered.

“Renounce it,” Daindreth insisted. “Renounce Caa Iss. Moreyne. All of them.”

The Mirror shimmered brighter and roiled, growing stronger and stronger. The light increased.

“I renounce Caa Iss. I renounce Moreyne. I end any and all bargains with them and their kind.”

“Idiot!” Caa Iss roared. “You *fool!* What have you done?”

Daindreth scooped Vesha up in his arms. His arms were covered in metal plate and the armor dug into her thighs and back. “Thad, can you—”

Someone shouted and a woman screamed. “No!”

Vesha didn't know what happened, but suddenly Daindreth stumbled, falling back toward the water.

"Daindreth!" the woman, probably Amira, screamed.

Then Daindreth and Vesha both were falling. She expected them to hit the water, but they didn't.

They kept going.

"Stop her!" Daindreth shouted. "Protect her!"

Then the two of them thudded into sand.

Vesha whimpered, having landed awkwardly atop her son. She rolled off, holding the bloody socket of her missing eye, and forced herself to look up. The mine was gone.

Overhead was an endless grey-black sky. The air was hot and smelled of brimstone.

They were in the Dread Marches.

Chapter Twenty-Eight

Thadred

Thadred leaned against Lleuad, gripping the little stallion's mane. He felt like he had been punched in the gut, barely able to breathe.

What...what had happened?

The young man who they'd rescued—or who they thought they had—had shoved Dain and Vesha into the pool. His eyes had washed red again and he'd gotten past the guards faster than any of them could react.

The young man now lay very dead on the ground, stabbed through with at least six swords. But it wouldn't bring Vesha and Dain back.

The water hadn't splashed, it had *opened*. For just an instant, they had seen a world beyond the water—a burned, charred husk of a world with grey skies and volcanic basalt spreading in every direction.

“Daindreth!” Amira wrestled with Westfall, lunging toward the water. “Daindreth, no!” Her voice cracked as she punched the guard captain, smashing her knuckles uselessly against his cuirass. “Daindreth!” Amira sobbed, leaning against Westfall as the guard gripped her arms like a vise.

Thadred stumbled to Amira, Dain's final command echoing in his ears. The emperor had realized what was happening, Thadred had seen it on his face. In the final moments before Dain had fallen into that black-tar landscape, he had given the order—*Stop her. Protect her.*

Thadred stepped up beside Amira.

“We have to go,” Westfall ordered. “It's too late!”

Thadred wondered for just a moment if perhaps Westfall was also a Kadra'han. The way he jumped to heed the emperor's commands seemed oddly quick, but some men were

that way in crisis, especially military men. They latched onto words like a greedy piglet on a sow's teats.

Thadred stepped up to Amira and rested a hand on her shoulder. He didn't feel grief, there was still too much shock for that.

"Thadred." Amira twisted around to him, but Westfall was smart enough not to let her go. "Thadred, please."

The water shimmered and began to fade. Caa Iss had also disappeared. Thadred couldn't see him anywhere.

"He's...he's gone." Thadred hardly believed it.

"He's not!" Amira screamed. "I can get him back, I can—"

Westfall hauled her up. "We get out of here," he ordered, turning into a battlefield commander. "The emperor has ordered us to protect the empress."

Yes. Yes, Daindreth *had* ordered them to do just that. Hadn't he?

Westfall dragged Amira back. She'd dove straight for the pool, giving him the chance to get a lock on her arms. Otherwise, she could probably have broken herself free. His gauntleted hands dug into her. It looked painful. She had to be bruising under that, but Westfall would keep her alive—even if he had to hurt her to do it.

As Thadred stepped forward, he thought about that. Protect Amira. That was what Dain had wanted.

The curse in his throat tightened slightly, just a fluttering sensation. No, Thadred couldn't free her from Westfall.

Stop her, yes. Thadred accepted that command.

Amira would go after Dain, hopeless as it was. She'd throw her life into whatever world of horrors awaited her if only for a chance to save him.

Amira was a smart girl. She knew as well as Thadred, the staring Istovari, and Westfall that what she wanted to do was hopeless. She couldn't save him. The portal might not open for

her and even if it did, what could she do? How could she get back out, even if she did find Dain?

No, it was wisest to stop her from killing herself.

Thadred knew all that, but he also knew he would dive in himself if Dain's commands hadn't stopped him. The Kadra'han curse wouldn't allow him to follow.

Thadred swallowed as the water began to turn back to a calm, placid reflection. The glow faded, like a fire that had burned too fast, too bright.

How exactly had Amira described it? Find a command that you could use to challenge another.

Thadred's throat constricted. No, not challenge, not challenge.

The tightness in his throat relaxed.

Amira whimpered in Westfall's grip. He *was* hurting her.

Thadred focused on that. Focused on the tightness in Amira's face, the sweat that beaded on her temple. Most of that was probably from the exertion of fighting, but Thadred didn't care.

He honed in on the stiff way she moved and how roughly Westfall dragged her away from the water.

Thadred was supposed to protect Amira. Daindreth had ordered that. But Westfall was *hurting* her.

Westfall dragged Amira past Thadred, turning his back to the knight. *Protect her*. Amira screamed, struggling against Westfall.

Thadred tackled him.

Westfall didn't see it coming and in a second, Thadred bore the other man to the ground.

"Go!" Thadred shouted, not letting himself consider who he was shouting at. "Go!"

Chapter Twenty-Nine

Amira

Amira didn't stop to think.

The instant Westfall went down, she twisted out of his grip.

“What are you doing?” Westfall bellowed, either to her or the man now wrapping arms around his neck.

“Go!” Thadred yelled. “Go!”

Amira scrambled past them, rushing straight for the lake's fading glow. Her foot kicked something on the way down—the eye of Moreyne that Vesha had ripped out of her skull.

On impulse, Amira snatched up the eye. It felt gooey and gelatinous in her fingers, slick with blood.

Soldiers came rushing after her, their armor clanking and sparking in the fading light.

Amira leapt straight into the water. She half expected a splash, but the water folded back, opening like a curtain.

She had an instant to be aware of black sand before she struck the side of a slope. She rolled, landing on her sheathed daggers and several of the buckles on her armor. Her helmet clanged against a rock before she finally managed to stop herself.

The first thing Amira noticed was the *ka*—or the absence of it. She bolted upright, expecting to see a horde of cythraul pressing in around her, but she was alone.

In the distance, she could just make out the red glow of fire mounts on the horizon. Black sand, an endless sea of basalt and volcanic rock spread in every direction.

The sky was a smoky haze of grey. She had no sword, just a few daggers, her helmet, and...

Her hand still gripped the eye in her hand. Amira looked down at it, studying its pale blue iris with the slit black pupil.

“Oh, good. You grabbed that. I’m still new to this whole divine inspiration business. But it looks like you were sufficiently inspired.”

Amira had a dagger pointed at the stranger the next instant. She scrambled back, forcing her feet under her. “Who are you?”

The stranger was pale, deathly pale. His long, dark robe was almost black, but not quite. His skin and hair were almost white—true white, like bleached bone—but also not quite. He had definitely not been there a moment ago.

He stood with his hood drawn over his head, the seamless garment seeming to swallow his form. He ignored Amira’s dagger. “I am the god of regrets.”

“Never heard of you,” Amira snapped back.

“Yes, well. I’m a rather new god.”

Amira scoffed. “How new?”

“About a month.”

Amira barked a laugh. “Are you a cythraul?”

The stranger rolled his eyes. “Do I look like a cythraul to you?”

“You could be hosting one.”

“My dear girl, cythraul don’t need hosts here.” He nodded to his right. “See for yourself.”

Amira kept the stranger in her line of sight but looked. She choked on a gasp.

A swarm of misshapen creatures with mangled, twisted bodies roved one of the far hillsides. No two were exactly alike. They were a collection of wings, horns, scales, claws, hooves, and tails. From this distance, Amira could see they were gathered in a circle, those at the center wailing and falling on the ground in anguish. Others appeared to snap and snarl at them, adding insult to whatever injury had been had.

“The cythraul you and your army have sent back.” He smirked as one of the cythraul smacked another. “And some of those who were left behind.”

“Left behind?”

“Yes, when Empress Vesha opened the portal in Iandua. Only so many could come through at a time, you see.”

Amira didn't see, but that was nothing new. “I'm here to find a human man who fell through the same portal I did.”

“Ah, yes. Daindreth Fanduillion. Your husband, correct?” The self-proclaimed deity adjusted the sleeves of his robe. “Come. Time is short.”

Amira leapt up and jabbed her dagger against the man's back. “And why would I trust you?”

The figure let off a dramatic sigh. “Anders warned me about you.”

“Anders?”

“Yes. Anders Darrigan.”

That surprised Amira for just a moment. “Darrigan? Captain Darrigan?”

“The very same. He's happy now and all that, don't worry. Happier than he ever was in life, I think. Poor bastard.”

“You don't sound very godlike,” Amira said.

“Sorry. As I said, I'm new.” The god of regrets twisted around, still making no move to remove her dagger from his back. “Your husband and his mother have been taken to the lair of Moreyne, the fallen goddess. They thwarted her plans for world domination, and she has taken that quite personally. Now, would you like to come or not?”

Amira glanced back to the hillock where the numbers of angry cythraul seemed to be increasing.

“Excellent.” The god set off in a brisk march. He was tall, roughly the same height as Daindreth.

“Vesha didn’t thwart her plans,” Amira muttered, walking after the hooded figure. “She’s the whole reason we’re here.”

“Really? I thought your mothers were the whole reason we’re here.” The figure had an edge of sarcasm that was definitely un-godlike. “Also, you don’t think Vesha gouging that eye out of her own skull counts for something?”

Amira looked down to where she still held the bloody eye. She tried not to think about what it was. “Who exactly are you?”

“As I said. The god of regrets.” The figure flourished the ghost of a bow.

“Why are you here?”

“I thought you might appreciate the help.” The god sniffed. “Though you aren’t striking me as the appreciative sort.”

“Why you? Why not one of the other gods?” Amira wouldn’t mind a god of fire or even Eponine to help her right now.

“Well, this is Moreyne’s domain. And she banished all the others by name. But I didn’t exist at the time, and I also have a definite stronghold here,” the god said. “Yes, this place teems with regrets.”

Amira didn’t know what to say to that. She kept the dagger in one hand, watching the surrounding hills.

She tried to feel for the stranger’s *ka*, but...couldn’t. It was like her sense of magic passed through him. He was either an illusion, or *ka* worked differently in this place, or he was telling the truth. Amira wasn’t sure if she wanted him to be telling the truth or not.

They marched on, sweat poured down Amira’s temples. Her feet sank into the black sand with every step, and she had to put twice as much effort into walking.

Her guide marched like a soldier. He didn’t float or glide the way she might expect a god to do. Instead, he trudged just

as she did. She even heard his labored breathing match her own.

They crossed plains of black basalt that steamed and roiled with unseen flames. From there, they marched between massive stone columns that had been bleached white. Though what had done the bleaching, Amira couldn't say. She saw no sign of a sun in this grey-black world.

Panting, Amira finally put away her dagger. "How far until we find Daindreth?"

"My dear," the god of regrets said, "we've already arrived."

Amira came up short beside him, her voice in her throat.

Before them lay a great skull, more massive than Amira had thought any creature could be. The titan's jaws were bleached white, mouth spilling out teeth like boulders.

"Is that—" Amira hardly knew what to ask.

"The bones of Tarcus," the god said. "One of the older gods. His first physical form, at least."

Amira shot the stranger a look.

"Don't worry. He has a much prettier body now."

Before the titan's ruined skull milled hundreds of cythraul. The creatures paced back and forth, wings and broken limbs dragging on the ground. They whined and howled, so low that Amira had mistaken them for the keening of the wind. But there was no wind here, she realized. There was only this stagnant, building heat.

"Your husband and his mother will be inside the skull," the god said. "That's where Moreyne's nest is, so I'm told."

"How do we get through that?" Amira jerked her chin toward the cythraul.

"You'll want to keep your daggers sheathed, for starters."

Amira blinked at the stranger. His eyes...there was something about them. The rest of him was faded, like a

garment that had been washed too many times, but his eyes were golden brown.

“Trust me, Amira,” the god said. He knew her name, which felt odd, but she supposed he would. “You want to save your husband? Your blades will have no power here.”

Amira wasn't sure what else she had expected. She swallowed. “How do I know you won't betray me?”

The god smiled wryly. There was a playfulness to it, almost a dare. “You don't. It keeps things exciting. Now are you ready?”

Amira gulped, staring down at the agitated pack of cythraul. She nodded. There was nothing else for her to do. If this was what it took for her to get back her husband, she would do it. Amira would rather die with him than accept living without him.

“Let's go.”

The god's expression softened. “You're very brave.”

Amira shook her head. “I love him.”

The god smiled and this time it met his eyes. “I can tell.” He looked back toward the skull and the crowd of cythraul gathered outside. “Follow my lead and do as I say.”

Amira had no better plan than to put her trust in this creature—even if it ended with her tortured for eternity by a mad goddess. Right now, she had better odds of saving Daindreth than she did an hour ago.

Amira followed the god as he marched down the slope toward the crowd of demons. Every instinct in her screamed that she should draw her weapons, draw on magic, *fight*.

But what could her weapons do to demons in a demon's paradise? And there was no *ka* except the tainted life of the cythraul and her own power. Strong as she was, fighting this many with her own *ka* would drain her long before she had the chance to do any real damage. Again, assuming these creatures could be damaged at all.

Amira wondered how this god planned to proceed. Would he offer the cythraul a bargain? Perhaps a—

“Hello there! Nieces and nephews!” The god wasted no time, striding up to the creatures and waving.

The mob of cythraul spun around, tails, wings, and ears twitching with anticipation. Countless pairs of teeth flashed, and the creatures rushed toward the god and Amira. Cries of glee and malicious hunger rose as the cythraul came to run them down.

It was all Amira could do to not draw her weapons.

“None of that,” the god said, fully composed. “We are here to see your mother. I am the newly made god of regrets, and I come to pay my respects to my elder sister.”

The cythraul stopped, glancing at one another.

“A new god?” several of them rasped.

“There hasn’t been a new god in thousands of years.”

“Why would the Two-in-One make a new god now?”

“What about her?” Hundreds of greedy eyes looked to Amira.

“An Istovari sorceress,” spat another.

“Fresh meat!”

“I want to hear her scream!”

“She killed my host!”

“Hold!” the god’s voice boomed, for the first time sounding to Amira like a god. “Amira, my dear, would you mind showing them why they don’t want to touch you?”

Taking the hint, Amira raised the eye held in her hand.

Several cythraul gasped and shrank back in recognition.

“As you might have heard,” the god said, “your mother recently lost an eye. I expect she wants it back, but if any of

you tries to touch that woman, she will crush it. Then imagine what your mother will do to you!”

The cythraul made mewling sounds, looking unsure.

“Your mother will remain one-eyed for eternity!” An edge of menace entered the god’s voice. “And it will be all your fault.” He emphasized the last few words, each syllable heavy with implication.

The cythraul stomped and shifted. They were a myriad of shapes and sizes. Some rose no higher than Amira’s knee, others towered at twice the height of a man. Some had scales, others had feathers or shells like beetles and pincers like crabs, while others had claws or even eerily human hands.

The only feature they all shared was the eyes—red, orange, and yellow eyes with the vertical slits in each and every face.

The cythraul stirred, but none of them moved forward. They rumbled lowly.

“Right then.” The god clapped his hands. “Make way. Coming through. Yes. Excuse us.” He marched straight, not waiting for the creatures to make a path.

To Amira’s surprise, they parted, skittering out of his way like a school of minnows making way for a pike. Come to think of it, not one of them questioned the god’s divinity. Amira might not be able to sense anything about him, but perhaps the cythraul could.

Amira marched after him, the eye of Moreyne held before her like a talisman. She clutched it in a firm grip, but careful not to damage it.

A scream echoed from ahead. Female.

The god flinched in front of Amira, his steps speeding up just a little and Amira trotted behind him.

The cythraul flocked around them, close, too close. Amira could smell brimstone and rot on them, a stench like living carcasses.

Amira strode between the rows of leering eyes, facing straight ahead. She kept her gaze on the open mouth of the giant's skull.

Daindreth. She was doing this for Daindreth.

Another scream rang out. A shiver of delight went through the cythraul, but Amira didn't dare react. Cythraul loved any weakness, any soft spot. That included compassion.

The god stepped straight into the mouth of the skull.

Amira stepped in after him. Screams echoed off the inside of the skull, but she couldn't see the source.

"Esteemed Sister," the god shouted, voice booming like that of a herald. "I have come to pay my respects."

Silence descended. Silence so abrupt and complete it made Amira's skin crawl. She almost preferred the screams.

At last, a voice spoke from in front of them. "Who are you?" The voice was the whisper of night—a shudder, rasp, and roar all at once. It was female, laden with authority, and edged with cruelty.

"A humble younger brother," the god said, though Amira wondered if his voice didn't waver just a bit.

Amira jumped as the voice suddenly came from her right.

"I do not know you," the voice replied.

The strange god canted his head in a slight bow. "I am a freshly made god, Esteemed Sister. Newborn and young."

"Mmm."

Amira cringed as the voice now came from directly overhead. She dared not look up for fear of what she might see.

"May we approach? We come to present a gift and return something lost to you."

"I should banish you from my realm this moment," the disembodied voice, the voice of Moreyne, hissed.

“But then, however shall I give you my gift?” the god protested.

A low rumble shook the skull, a sound so filled with spite and irony that Amira didn't recognize it as a laugh at first. “You are a bold one,” Moreyne laughed. “Speaking to me thus in my own realm?”

“I'm not sure where else I would speak to you, Esteemed One,” the god said. “Seeing as how you're unable to be anywhere else.”

A growl reverberated through the skull, shaking the very ground.

Amira stumbled and barely held onto the eye in a death grip. Her heart raced. Everything about this magicless, dead, poisoned world had her aching to leave.

To her surprise, the voice spoke again. “Come, Insolent One. Come, let me see you before I banish you.”

The god cast Amira a brief grin and what might have been a shrug.

Amira had little confidence in this strange creature, but she had nothing else to go on. She was in the middle of the Dread Marches, in the heart of Moreyne's nest, and Daindreth was here. Somewhere.

“I think her voice came from this way. Let's be going, then.” The young god wove between the rows of massive teeth.

They moved in the direction the screams had come from. The shadows made it hard to see, but the god led her carefully along the way. Amira clung close to his back, afraid to let him out of her sight.

He wound his path left and right, stepping over litter and debris. His robe brushed something pale that crunched underfoot. Amira glanced down and realized it was the remains of a foreleg connected to a hoof by a bit of dried cartilage.

The whole floor was littered with bones in various stages of decay. Some were wings, claws, legs, and even tails.

Amira remembered that many of the cythraul always seemed to be missing limbs and appendages. Even Caa Iss was missing his nose. Did Moreyne mutilate her own children?

Amira moved faster, as she walked, she sensed *ka* up ahead. Human *ka*. Two sources.

Her heart leapt in her throat. Daindreth was alive. He had to be, but there was also *ka* spattered up ahead. Fresh blood on the ground, most likely. Daindreth and Vesha were both hurt, but Amira couldn't tell which was which.

They stepped out from behind a broken tooth and Amira almost screamed at the sight before her.

There was Daindreth—naked with his hands chained to the side of the skull that made up the wall. He was bloody, black dirt covered him head to foot, but he was alive and in one piece. He saw her and his face turned to instant fear. He shook his head in a silent plea.

Vesha also lay naked—pale, bloody, and totally defenseless beneath the talons of a massive creature straight from Amira's nightmares.

Like the other Istovari, she had seen Eponine in her dreams and even if the goddess was a little different from how artists depicted her, she'd still been recognizable. Moreyne was nothing like what Amira had imagined.

The creature crouched over Vesha was massive, with shoulders towering higher than the height of a man. Her body was vaguely feline with a long tail and a mane of white hair. She was covered in pale hair almost as white as the skull. Pink veins and capillaries showed beneath her skin. Her limbs ended in phalanges that were not quite human hands and feet, but something near to it, with massive, hooked claws like those of a bird of prey. Huge pale wings lay folded gracefully on her back.

Her face was not quite a cat's, but not quite human, either.

One eye was crystalline blue with an elliptical slit. The other eye was an empty socket, bright pink and fleshy.

Moreyne looked up as the god stepped into view, Amira at his side. The goddess' slaving jaws snapped, like an impatient animal. "You come bringing gifts?"

"Amira, go!" Daindreth screamed, writhing in his chains. "Get out of here!"

"Silence!" Moreyne lashed her claws in his direction, not quite reaching.

"I'd listen to her, son," the god said.

Daindreth looked to the strange deity at Amira's side. His lips moved wordlessly as fresh shock washed over his face. He looked back to Amira, but she didn't dare speak out of turn. The strange god had gotten her this far. She would continue trusting him for now.

Amira realized with a start that Daindreth and Vesha weren't the only captives here. Beside Daindreth was a mangled, bloody figure Amira had seen before. Her limbs were bent by chains, and she had been beaten, bruised, and clawed into oblivion, but that was Saan Thii.

Further down the wall was the creature Amira had seen right after stabbing his host mere hours ago. Araa Oon was also a captive here, as were several other cythraul Amira didn't recognize.

Moreyne had gathered together everyone who had failed or defied her this day.

The god cleared his throat, attention returning to Moreyne. "I don't have gifts, Esteemed Sister. I am afraid that was an exaggeration. But I do have some mutually beneficial trades in mind."

"Yes?" Moreyne clicked her claws impatiently.

The god pointed to Amira. "Show her."

Amira was sure this god was still hiding something, but she did as he said and held up Moreyne's lost eye.

Moreyne snarled, talons digging deeper into Vesha's naked body. The former empress and former witch cried out, blood soaking the sand. "My eye! The gift I so graciously gifted this one. Only for her to throw it away." The last few words were aimed at Vesha as the goddess leaned down closer, teeth bared.

"The good news is that you can trade for it back!" the god interrupted, his voice a little too cheerful. "Yes, I believe so. Amira, my dear, is there anything in this goddess' lair you might want to exchange for the return of her eye?"

Instantly, Amira took the hint. With a brief prayer to Eponine, she held the eye out to the goddess. "Your eye for my husband." Figuring it couldn't hurt her chances, Amira bowed. "Great goddess."

Moreyne hissed. "Insolent bitch. I should have your skin peeled off and fried."

Amira swallowed and lifted her head. "Esteemed Goddess, he's nothing to you." Amira didn't know how a god's body worked, but if a goddess had been able to tear out her eye and put it in someone else, it stood to reason she could put it back in its original socket, too. "Please." Amira didn't know what else to say.

Moreyne's claws squeezed. Vesha let off another cry.

Amira pictured every mutilated child, butchered villager, and mangled servant she had seen in the wake of Vesha's horde so she wouldn't react. Regardless of if Vesha had repented or not, that had all still been her doing. Hundreds, maybe even thousands of people had met horrific ends because of her.

"You want...*only* your husband?" Moreyne rumbled.

"And your word that you and your children will allow us to leave the Dread Marches unharmed." Amira wasn't sure how they would be leaving, come to think of it. Perhaps she should have included an escape in her request.

Moreyne snarled wordlessly at her demands.

But the god at Amira's side nodded his encouragement.

"Agreed. Have him," Moreyne snapped. She severed Daindreth's chains with a swipe of her claws. She scooped him up like he was a puppy and shoved him to Amira's feet.

Amira dropped down to grab him. "Daindreth!"

He clung to her, his blood smearing her clothes as he did. "You shouldn't have come," he rasped. "Amira, why did you come?"

"My eye, sorceress," Moreyne rumbled.

Amira held onto Daindreth with one arm and offered the severed eye with the other, proud that her hand didn't shake.

The goddess swiped it back. In a swift motion, she had returned to crouching over Vesha, pinning the witch to the ground. Moreyne jabbed her eye back into the empty socket, yowled in pain, then shook her head and blinked several times. She snorted in a catlike way. "You ventured into my realm to save him?"

"Yes," Amira answered. It hardly seemed wise to ignore a goddess.

"Why?" Moreyne cocked her head to the side, now blinking at her with two eyes.

"He's mine," Amira answered shortly, wrapping both arms around him.

Moreyne's tail twitched softly. "You Istovari. With your love and your sacrifice and your *husbands*." Moreyne sneered with disgust. "You take after my sister, I suppose."

As angry as she had been and most likely still was, it seemed that the return of her eye had calmed her, at least a little.

"But would he do the same for you?" Moreyne asked. She looked to Daindreth, slit eyes peering down. Though neither of them said anything, Moreyne cackled, her mirth almost as

terrible as her wrath. “You would! He would have come after you as quickly as you came for him.”

Amira had no cloak or mantle to offer Daindreth, so she knelt beside him, her arms still around him. “Are you alright? Can you walk?”

Daindreth staggered upright. “I can walk, but...” Daindreth looked back to the bloody figure pinned beneath Moreyne’s claws.

Moreyne studied Daindreth and Amira together. She made a purring sound, like she was genuinely fascinated.

Amira was ready to go. This had already gone far better than she had expected. She looked to the god.

The newborn deity cleared his throat. “I have one more trade to offer you, Esteemed Sister.”

Moreyne made a purring sound, leaning closer. Her tail twitched like a cat about to pounce. “Do you have a name, little brother?”

The god gave a wry smile, and flourished a bow that was definitely in the imperial style. “Drystan, god of regrets, at your service.”

Amira’s heart skipped a beat. It couldn’t be, could it?

“Drystan.” The name didn’t seem to mean anything to Moreyne. If anything, she spoke it with mild contempt.

Drystan wasn’t an uncommon name, not since the late emperor had been so popular. But...

Daindreth looked from Amira to the stranger at their side. “It is you,” he choked.

“Drystan?” Vesha spoke for the first time, her voice breaking out in a dry sob.

Amira looked between all three of them, supporting Daindreth against her side. Her mind spun with the implications, trying to grasp just what it was she was seeing.

Emperor Drystan was dead. Very dead. How...?

But the Dread Marches was hardly the land of the living, was it?

Drystan, the god of regrets, offered a sad smile to the former empress, then looked back to Moreyne. "I am a young god, yes," he said, folding his hands behind his back. "It has been quite an adjustment, but I..." He focused on Moreyne and Amira had the feeling of some unspoken understanding passing between them. "You have many regrets, Esteemed Sister." His voice was soft, gentle, like one comforting a wounded animal.

Amira squeezed Daindreth against her side. She couldn't find pity for this creature, not after everything she and her children had put them through, but no one was asking her to.

Moreyne bristled. "When you have lived a few thousand years, return and speak to me, whelp," she snapped.

"I will take that as an invitation, but before we go." Drystan pulled something from the pockets of his robe. It was a vial with some grey substance inside. It swirled, a faint metallic glow coming from within the glass.

"What is it?" Moreyne sniffed the air.

Amira reached toward it with her own power, a little surprised to find she could sense it. There was *ka* in it, *ka* like a mortal might have.

"This is my own mortality, which I sacrificed for godhood," Drystan said. "I will spare you the details of how it came to be in this form. It was a rather painful procedure. But now that I am without it, I have come to realize what a great gift mortality is." Drystan swirled the contents, watching them writhe inside. "The gift of a mortal life. Triumph, defeat, joy, sorrow—all of it is yours for the taking. And when it's done?" Drystan smiled. "Why, when it's done, you go to Alshone and spend eternity becoming even better than you were."

Moreyne blinked at Drystan slowly, large eyes studying him like a cat seeing a snake. For once, the goddess did not

Speak.

“This woman,” Drystan nodded to the bloody form of Vesha, “I can feel her regrets. They are many. So many she feels she will drown in them, but compared to yours?” Drystan’s eyes flicked back to Moreyne. “Do you remember Alshone, Esteemed Sister?”

Moreyne let off a sharp roar, a warning. She sprang onto her paws. “What is the meaning of this? What do you want? State your trade!”

“A mortal life,” Drystan said, holding out the vial, “for one mortal woman.”

Moreyne’s great head shook, mane flapping. “Explain, cretin.”

“Any immortal who drinks this shall be granted a mortal life with all its rights and privileges.” Drystan held up the vial. “You will live a mortal life and die a mortal death. Then you shall enter Alshone, as is the right of mortals. You will have no memory of your godhood in life, but you will keep a mortal’s rights after death.”

Moreyne’s eyes flickered. “We cannot lie. Gods cannot lie.” She shook her head like there was some fly or gnat in her ear she couldn’t shake.

“I speak truth,” Drystan said. He leaned closer. “A mortal life, Moreyne. Freedom from the Dread Marches and a return to Alshone when it is done.”

Moreyne blinked at him. “Alshone? Where they can see the stars?” The longing in the goddess’ voice was almost palpable.

Drystan nodded solemnly. “Yes, Sister.”

As suddenly as she had shown sadness, Moreyne drew herself up, wings rising so that she towered over all of them like a colossus. “If the gods think I can be so easily tricked into surrendering my power, they are wrong. You go back to Alshone and you tell my sister and the others that I will not be taken by their false promises.”

Drystan took a deep breath. He opened his mouth to speak, but Moreyne interrupted.

“Still. No god has bottled their mortality before. That is... valuable.” Moreyne locked her jaws onto Vesha’s shoulder. She picked up the naked woman like a sadistic mother cat. Vesha screamed yet hung helpless in the creature’s gasp. Moreyne tossed Vesha at Drystan’s feet and loomed closer. She held out her taloned paw.

Drystan, taking the cue, handed the vial to the goddess. Without waiting, he dropped to his knees before Vesha.

“Drystan?” Vesha choked, her voice hoarse and broken. “Is that you?” Vesha was missing her right eye, nothing but a bloody gouge left behind. Unlike Moreyne, Amira doubted Vesha would be getting her eye back. Her body was covered in bruises, scratches, and filth. “Drystan?”

The god cradled her against his chest, scooping her up into his arms. “Hush, love,” he whispered. “You’re safe now.”

“You strike a poor bargain,” Moreyne sneered. “I give you a one-eyed failure of a witch and you give me a priceless treasure in exchange.”

Drystan’s voice was firm but lacked its earlier mirth. “She is quite priceless to me, Esteemed Sister.”

Moreyne snorted with derision then laughed again, a sound to make Amira’s skin crawl. “I look forward to your next visit, little brother. This has been...profitable.”

For all Moreyne said she would not drink the contents of the vial, the goddess held it tight in her paw, clutching it like a beggar with a precious gem. Moreyne had spent eons trying to escape the Dread Marches. Now she held escape in her paws. All it would take was one, single drink of mortality. All it would take was renouncing godhood.

“Until next time, Esteemed Sister.” Drystan jerked his head to Amira and Daindreth. “Come along, children.”

Amira and Daindreth weren't about to argue. With Drystan leading the way, they hobbled after him. Daindreth moved with a limp and was also barefoot. Amira supported him, his arm slung over her shoulder.

Drystan led the way with Vesha in his arms. She curled against him, sobbing so hard her entire body shook. Drystan said something to her, kissing her bloody forehead, her filthy hair.

Outside the skull, the cythraul stirred in surprise. They had gathered around for a show, but here came Drystan and Amira, leading Moreyne's captives free.

"It's been wonderful, nieces, nephews, and other distant relations," Drystan said, his debonaire tone returning. "I will see you all again in the future, I'm sure. So much *regret* in this place, I'll have to pay another visit."

The cythraul seemed too stunned to do anything. They parted and let the three mortals and one god pass by, marching up and toward the massive ribs of the giant.

Amira hated turning her back to the creatures, but she firmed her stance and kept moving. The monsters hissed and snarled, but she didn't turn around and none of them pursued.

Their strange little group kept walking.

Drystan strode ahead, leading them as if he had been here a dozen times. Amira began to recognize the paths she and the god had taken before.

"Where are we going?" Daindreth asked after a time.

"The portal you came through," Drystan replied. "I assume you want to go through that one? There's one or two closer to here, but they'll take you to other parts of the continent. At least, I think they're connected to the same continent. I haven't had much time for exploring yet."

They walked in silence for several more moments.

Finally, Daindreth asked the question that Amira had felt simmering in the air this whole time. "How?"

Drystan let off a long, slow sigh. He had been carrying Vesha for at least a mile now but showed no sign of tiring. A benefit of godhood, perhaps. “We can see what’s happening in the world after we die. It’s a long story, one that will take a far longer walk to share. But we aren’t allowed to interact with the world of the living. We can petition the gods, but to stop something like this...” Drystan trailed off. “Moreyne has already banished the other gods from her realm. None of them could come bargain with her. I...” Drystan looked down to Vesha. “Forgive me, dearest. But I knew Moreyne would drag you into the Dread Marches eventually. The moment you came here...well, I had to do something.”

“You told me you’d been a god for a month,” Amira shot back.

“Correct,” Drystan confirmed. “I made that decision after Vesha came here the first time.”

Amira resisted the urge to glare at the woman. Most of this was Vesha’s fault, but as they’d been walking, it had occurred to her that she had plenty of regrets of her own.

The more time she spent with Drystan, the more she remembered mistakes, crimes, and transgressions. Some she had committed under her father’s compulsion, but many, she had to admit, had been all her.

If this was how he made people feel, she expected Drystan would never be a *popular* god.

“I was content to wait for you, dearest,” Drystan whispered, voice low, though not quite low enough to be private. “We all have to do that for our loved ones, but if you’d gone to Moreyne...” Drystan trailed off, letting the implication hang. Vesha would have become a cythraul. Drystan would have spent an eternity without her.

Daindreth might have met the same fate if the god and Amira hadn’t shown up. A few centuries of torture should be enough to drive even the kindest man to madness.

“I don’t deserve it,” Vesha rasped. Her voice was raw and broken, like she had been screaming for a very long time. “The things I did, the things that happened because of me.” Vesha’s voice broke off into sobs. “I don’t deserve to be saved.”

“I know you don’t deserve it,” Drystan whispered. “But you get it anyway. Isn’t that wonderful?”

Amira looked to Daindreth. Her husband watched his parents, a pained expression on his face.

“I have many regrets from my life, beloved. Enough that the pantheon made me the damned god of regrets.” Drystan smiled tenderly down at the battered, broken woman in his arms. “But you were never one of them.”

Amira didn’t want her heart to squeeze at that, but it did. So this was where Daindreth had gotten his devotion, his passion. He might not be a conqueror, but there was quite a bit of his father in him after all.

“What happens now?” Amira asked, since no one else seemed eager to discuss it.

“I’m planning to drop you two back in that mine.” Drystan made a shrugging motion. “It’s a mess, I should warn you. Not to mention the empire can be expecting a few droughts and floods in the coming months as Moreyne’s power over the land fades. Maybe a plague or two. Sorry in advance.”

Amira and Daindreth looked to each other again. There seemed to be so much explanation left. And yet neither seemed able to find the right questions.

“I’m told I won’t be seeing either of you again for a very long time. Which is a good thing, I suppose, yes?” Drystan seemed to be chattering.

“What about her?” Amira thought she did a good job of keeping the lingering contempt out of her voice.

Drystan glanced down to Vesha in his arms. “I was hoping she’d marry me.”

Amira felt like she’d missed something.

“I thought we were married,” Vesha rasped.

“Yes, well, you see, that marriage was for *as long as we both shall live*. I am not living anymore.”

Vesha made a groaning sound, her one remaining eye closed.

“Granted, you wouldn’t quite become a goddess, but there are a few benefits. You would have dominion over my lands. My corner of Alshone is a bit bare at the moment. I haven’t really started with the decorating, but our son has agreed to live with us. He’s very excited to meet you.”

Amira frowned as the sand sank beneath her feet. Was it her imagination or did Drystan—conqueror of an entire continent and god of regrets, who had just taken two captives from Moreyne herself—sound *nervous*?

“Our son?” Vesha sounded confused, looking past Drystan’s shoulder to Daindreth.

“The younger one,” Drystan clarified. “I named him Dare. It’s short for Darrigan. I hope you don’t mind.”

Vesha swallowed, her hand clutching at Drystan’s robes. “The baby?”

“Yes,” Drystan answered. “The baby. Though he doesn’t like it when we call him that. He’s nearly twenty now.”

Amira didn’t understand all that, but she was fine not understanding. If Daindreth was safe and they wouldn’t have to worry about Vesha, she counted this as a victory.

Up ahead, Amira noticed a disturbance in the air. She thought it was just a heat mirage, but as she came closer, she recognized the ripple of a portal. Beyond it, she caught glimpses of a dark cave.

Drystan came to a stop. “Here we are. I can open this, but I can’t go through it. Rules of godhood and all.” He sounded almost apologetic. “I’ll close it as soon as you pass through.”

“What about the other portals you mentioned?” Amira clipped. “Will cythraul come through those?”

“No,” Drystan said. “Cythraul can’t pass into your world unless they are invited. But you should know there are quite a few still loose. I didn’t get the chance to count, but it was close to a thousand, with and without bodies, roaming your world.”

Amira almost cursed at that but considering she had just taken her husband back from the Dread Marches, she wasn’t going to complain.

“Well, Vesha dear, here is your choice.” Drystan sighed heavily as he shifted her in his arms. “Would you like to go back to the mortal world or to Alshone with me?”

Vesha shook her head, one hand touching the edges of her bloody eye socket. “What?”

“You can go back to the mortal world,” Drystan said.

Amira inhaled a breath. Daindreth squeezed her arm to stop her.

The god of regrets cleared his throat. “Or you can come with me. To Alshone.”

Vesha peered up at him.

“You don’t have to marry me either way,” Drystan added. His words began to come out all at once. “And your eye might not be restored if you become my consort. There are some drawbacks.”

“I’ve missed you.” Vesha’s fingers twisted into the front of his robe. “I’ve missed you so much and you...you know what I did, and you still saved me.”

Drystan nodded. “Of course,” he said, like trading his own mortality to the fallen goddess had been an obvious solution. “I should warn you.” The god grinned, an edge of mischief in his voice. “Beorn—you remember him from my personal guard? Anyway, Beorn and Dare have been the only ones in my dominion so far. And their taste is terrible. They built our mansion entirely from symmetrical grey stones. Entirely! Even

the furniture. Maybe they thought it was funny, but I will not be sleeping on a stone slab. My corpse is doing enough of that, thank you very much.”

Vesha’s shoulders shook in what might have been a laugh or a sob or both. “Please take me with you,” she whispered. “Stone slabs or not, just...let me be with you.”

Amira and Daindreth watched the exchange quietly, mostly because Daindreth had kept squeezing her arm to keep her quiet.

Drystan grinned at that, a huge boyish grin that was totally wrong for a god, and definitely wrong for the god of regrets. “Wonderous creature.” He kissed her temple. Finally, he looked back to Daindreth and Amira. “Well, children. This is goodbye, then. At least for a few decades. Live a long time and try not to need my help, alright?”

Daindreth shook his head. “Father.” He coughed, his voice was thick with a kind of desperation, like he knew there was no time to say everything he wanted to say. “I am learning to be emperor, but some of the time, I don’t know what to do.”

“Son.” Drystan stepped closer. “I will tell you a secret.” He smiled wanly. “I didn’t know what to do either. And not just some of the time.”

Daindreth narrowed his eyes at his father. “That is not helpful.”

Drystan threw his head back and laughed. “Then I will tell you another secret. One I’m not supposed to tell, but we’re in the Dread Marches, so who’s going to stop me? Not like Gwydrun is here to be a stickler for the rules.” Drystan leaned closer. “I’ve seen your name written in the Book of Fates, my son. In a few centuries, they will remember you as Daindreth the Great.”

“Daindreth the Great,” Amira repeated. “I like the sound of that.”

Drystan laughed again. “Just wait until you hear what they’ll call *you*, my dear lady.”

Amira wasn't sure what that was supposed to mean. She glared at the god, but that only made him laugh harder.

Vesha gasped, wincing in Drystan's arms.

"Forgive me." Instantly, the god was serious. "Go, children. That portal will close as soon as you step through. Don't wait too long to use it, eh? We will see you again when you come to Alshone."

With that odd farewell, the god stepped into the air and vanished. He was there one moment and the next, both he and the former empress were gone.

Amira and Daindreth exchanged a look, and gripping each other tight, they dove through the portal.

One moment they were standing in the hot dryness of the Dread Marches, and the next they were in water.

Thick water that seemed *wrong* and tasted of salt. The water carried them to the surface almost instantly.

Daindreth cried out as they scrambled to shore, and Amira used what strength she had to help him onto the soft bank.

Daindreth gasped in pain, breathing heavily.

"What's wrong?" Amira demanded, feeling his body. "Darling, what's wrong?"

"Salt," Daindreth hissed. "It stings."

Amira channeled *ka* into him, but it seemed to do little for the salt in his many open cuts and wounds. "I'm sorry."

The blue light of the portal gradually faded. Before it did, Amira saw the remains of their fight, bloody stains and gashes in the earth.

It had been hours since the fight in the cavern. The soldiers appeared to have left and taken the dead with them.

That meant Amira and Daindreth would have to find their way back up in the dark.

"I hate this," Daindreth muttered.

“Me, too,” Amira agreed. In the dark, she found his arm and slung it over her shoulders. At least now she had *ka* in the world again, not a great deal of it and nothing to signal the presence of any living beings close by. But it was enough she could channel some of it into him as they walked.

Amira had no idea how long they stumbled through the mines, stopping to rest a few times and even to sleep at one point. Waking in total darkness was a jarring experience Amira never wanted to repeat.

They trudged on and onward, crawling out of the mines at sunrise. A guard had been posted at the mouth of the cave—wise on Westfall’s part.

It was easy for Amira to prove her identity—all it took was a few minor spells. In moments, a blanket was brought for Daindreth and they were swarmed by physicians, sorceresses, and retainers.

Sair embraced Amira with a cry of relief. Westfall came running and when he saw Daindreth alive and being tended by servants, Amira could have sworn she saw tears in his eyes.

Westfall knelt to Amira, hands clasped in front of him in the old way of pledging fealty. Amira didn’t respond right away, more shocked than anything. Recovering herself, she clasped her hands around his, accepting the pledge. Neither of them said anything, but when Amira released him and Westfall stood, she knew she’d won him over, too.

Thadred was not so proper. He crushed Amira in a bear hug. “You crazy bitch!” he howled, lifting her off the ground. “You absolute *madwoman!*” They both laughed, though Amira could hardly breathe. “You actually did it!”

“Yes,” Daindreth agreed, exhausted, and looking absolutely terrible, but smiling. “We did it.”

They’d lost people in those mines and the partially filled mass grave was a reminder of the nameless hundreds who had been victim to the cythraul. There were still cythraul

unaccounted for and there was a promise of disasters in the coming months as the land shook off Moreyne's grasp.

But they had done it.

They had defeated Caa Iss, Vesha, and Moreyne.

Six months ago, Amira had been an enslaved Kadra'han with no hope of a future. Today, she was a victorious empress who had saved the love of her life from the Dread Marches themselves.

As word spread through the camp of the emperor's miraculous survival, cheers rose from among the men. The sun rose, bathing them in the golden promise of a new day.

Chapter Thirty

Thadred

Thadred would have liked to sleep for a week, but there was work to be done. Though he had only been “lost forever” for a few hours, word that Daindreth was dead had somehow spread like headlice through a barracks.

Two ministers had put their own names forward as “protector of the realm,” and one distant Fanduillion cousin had already sent word to his retainers asking for their support.

That made it awkward when Dain—still with bruises on his face from the mines, the Dread Marches, and gods knew what else—came marching into the palace at the head of his victorious army. Thadred and Amira rode beside him, followed by the Istovari and their soldiers.

Once they returned, there had barely been time to scrape off the mud before there were meetings, reports, and reassurances to be given to the court, the city, and the empire. No one knew how long the instability would last in the weather and the land. But it would wear off eventually, Amira and Dain both seemed sure of that.

When Thadred asked them what had happened, they’d told him in snatches and fragments. Something about being rescued by the youngest of the gods. He wasn’t really clear on what had happened to Vesha, but she wasn’t in the Dread Marches anymore and the couple seemed sure she wouldn’t be coming back. Ever.

Officially, Vesha was reported dead in a cave-in, though if anyone had cared to check the mine, they would have found no recent cave-ins. Stories of her witchcraft had spread, along with tales of monsters with red eyes and men who could tear apart city gates with their bare hands.

Cromwell had his plate full deciding which artful lies, convenient truths, and creative omissions to feed the public. Amira wore silk gowns and jeweled coronets again, but she

still met with soldiers and informants as often as ladies and ministers.

Lady of Whispers was what they had started calling Amira, that, and Queen of Strings. Rumors had started that she'd been working to put Daindreth on the throne from the start, that this whole thing—from her original substitution as his bride to going into the Dread Marches—was a carefully orchestrated plan.

More Istovari arrived from Hylendale to serve as Amira's retainers. None of them were as powerful as she was, but they made for an impressive retinue.

There was discussion of starting a sorcerer's college in the city. Perhaps enough sorcerers and sorceresses remained in the empire. No way to know if there might still be some in hiding.

Thadred found himself placed in charge of hunting down cythraul over the next few weeks. He was perfect for the job.

He had connections in the army and was known to many of the noble houses. He was also an Istovari—even if he was still learning—and rode a magical monster horse. Thadred was familiar enough that the reeves and barons respected him, but he seemed mystical enough that they believed he could handle demons.

Finally, Thadred had found something he was good at—that was also useful.

They burned Tapios' body so that his ashes could be transported back to Hylendale and interred with his family. Amira and Dain had both attended. A part of Thadred had dreaded going, but he had gone anyway.

He had stood beside Sair while Rhis wept. Silent tears slid down her face while the stench of Tapios' burning flesh diffused them all.

Thadred had wanted to find the right words, but nothing seemed adequate. So he had put an arm around Sair and let her lean on him as her brother's body wasted away within the fire.

Rhis found Thadred in the stables a few days after the funeral. Thadred had intended to check Lleuad briefly between meetings, but Rhis begged to see the horse. Thadred was supposed to meet with a reeve from near Thurston today, but that wasn't for another hour. He gave in.

They fed the kelpie strips of dried beef in silence for a long time. Lleuad was still adjusting to life in the imperial stables, but didn't seem to mind all the free meat.

A few stable hands passed them, giving the kelpie a wide berth. They had learned the hard way that Lleuad was to be avoided.

"I don't remember my papa," Rhis said quietly, head down. "I do miss him, I think, but I'm not sure. I just know what Mama and Avva Tapios told me."

Thadred glanced down, a little surprised to hear the boy speak.

"Don't tell Mama. It will make her sad."

Thadred nodded. "I promise."

Rhis's voice trembled. "Will I forget about Avva, too?"

"No," Thadred said quickly. "You're not going to forget him." He thought about explaining that Rhis was older now, but suspected that wasn't actually what the boy needed to hear.

Rhis wiped his nose and scrubbed at his eyes.

Thadred put a hand on Rhis's shoulder. "I never met your father, but I know he would be proud of you. Your uncle, too." That seemed like the right thing to say. Rhis's shoulder was small under his hand, a reminder of how young the boy really was.

Rhis was a kid. Just a kid.

"Would you be proud of me?" Rhis looked up, face ruddy with snot and tears.

"Yes, Rhis. I would be proud of you," Thadred said, not sure why his voice cracked. "You're a good kid."

Rhis started crying again and put his skinny arms around Thadred.

Thadred held the boy, not sure what else to do. The kelpie watched them, chewing on the last strip of dried beef while his tail swished calmly.

“Is Lord Thadred here?”

Thadred’s heart flipped in his chest at Sair’s voice.

A stable hand’s voice replied from somewhere farther down the aisle. “He’s with the kelpie, ma’am. Down that way.”

Rhis jerked away from him like a startled fawn. “I’m supposed to be at lessons.”

Thadred hadn’t even known the boy was having lessons, but perhaps that was thanks to Fonra. The princess would have probably thought of something like that.

Rhis bolted out of the stall, making Lleuad take a step back. The stallion whickered uneasily as Rhis took off down the stable aisle, running in the opposite direction of Sair.

Skipping lessons and hiding from his mother? Maybe Thadred should rethink all his *you’re a good kid* assurances.

Thadred patted Lleuad’s neck, one hand on his halter. “Steady.”

Lleuad’s white eyes flicked suspiciously in his direction, tail lashing from side to side in irritation. He didn’t like people rushing around him. Most wild animals didn’t.

“Thadred.”

He felt her before he saw her. Her power was warm, steady. Sair was not as powerful as Amira, not by a long shot, but her magic set her apart from every other presence nearby. There was something comforting about it.

“Sair.” Thadred patted the kelpie’s neck, feeding the horse another strip of beef.

“Was that Rhis who just ran out of here?”

Thadred debated his response for a moment. “I didn’t know he had lessons.”

Sair heaved a sigh, glancing in the direction her son had gone.

“Don’t be too angry with him. The kid’s having a rough time of it.” Thadred shrugged awkwardly. “He wanted to see Lleuad.”

Sair nodded, seeming to come to the same conclusion. “Thank you.”

“For what?” Thadred was genuinely confused.

“Being kind to him.”

Thadred coughed. “Of course.” He wondered if now would be a good time to bring up taking on Rhis as his squire. He might not be a knight in the traditional sense anymore, but he would still need staff and attendants.

Squiring for Thadred would mean a full education for Rhis, as befitted an imperial youth, and opportunities at court. The chance to make connections and friendships with the next generation of generals and politicians.

But then again...though there might not be official rules, it was generally frowned upon for a knight to court the mother of his squire.

The stall was blocked by a single bar and Sair ducked under it, slipping inside. Lleuad sniffed in her direction. She held out a hand for the kelpie and he nosed her knuckles for a moment before he snorted and shook his mane.

Thadred suddenly couldn’t stay still. He needed something to do, so he picked up a brush from by the door and started stroking the kelpie’s coat.

Why was he nervous? He wasn’t new at this.

Sair wanted him, he’d known that for a while. He wanted her. In the past, that would have been enough. So why did he

feel like he was in uncharted territory? Why did this feel so *new*?

“Sair.” Thadred cleared his throat, facing her. Hordes of demons he could stare down without flinching, but a woman he cared about?

She was in a grey dress, though this one was shimmering damask, made for court. Her hair was modestly pulled up and partly tucked beneath a beaded cap, but a few strands had worked free, caressing her cheeks. Sair always had a touch of wildness to her, a touch of something that reminded him she belonged to the rocks, trees, and mountains as much as anything else.

Sair looked up at him with quiet expectancy, so open and earnest. She was honest—not just with her words, but with her actions, too. She didn’t pretend.

Thadred tried to think of what to say, but no words came to mind.

It was Sair who broke the silence. “We’ll be burying my brother’s ashes in the Haven with his wife and child. After, I plan to return here with Rhis.”

“I am sorry, Sair,” he blurted. “I am so sorry, and if I could change what happened, I would, but—”

In an instant, Sair closed the distance between them and took his hand. “It wasn’t your fault.” Her words were soft. “I don’t blame you and I never did.” She meant it.

Thadred closed his eyes, heart hammering in his chest. She was so close to him. He could smell apple blossoms on her. Had she worn perfume to come see him?

“Thadred.” Sair clasped his hand in both of hers. “I...” She cleared her throat. “Empress Amira has tasked me with negotiating the return of the Istovari to Hylendale.” Sair inhaled, hesitating. “And I know you have work to do here. Important work.”

Thadred nodded. The cythraul had scattered far and wide across the empire, fleeing into corners and cracks. He had his job cut out for the next year at least, maybe longer. “Is this goodbye?” he asked, keeping his voice down.

Sair’s grip tightened. “I will be coming back.” There was a plea in her words. “As soon as my brother is laid to rest and I make sure the Istovari have established relations with King Hyle, I will be back.”

Thadred looked down at their joined hands. She had lovely hands, even if there were still scars from where Vessa’s Kadra’han had driven knives through them months ago.

He imagined kissing those scars and each of her fingers, then her palms, up to the soft skin of her wrists and...

Thadred brushed the stray tendrils of hair from her cheek. She was lovely. Soft. Inviting.

Her breath caught and she swallowed. Looking up at him, her lips parted.

“You will come back?” He kept his voice down, not wanting any of his thousand different emotions to bleed in.

“Yes,” Sair spoke the word like a vow.

Thadred hated that she was leaving. He hated it more than he could express. Fear crept up on him. He’d had many lovers, all of them had left. Not one of them had ever come back.

But Sair wasn’t a lover. Not yet. She was an almost. A could be. An unknown.

He shouldn’t do this. Sair wanted a husband and Rhis needed a father. He wasn’t good for either of those things. *But why not?* demanded a traitorous voice deep inside him. *Men change all the time. Why not you?*

Sair made him want to change. The thought was daunting. It challenged everything he had thought about himself for his entire life, but for Sair?

For her, he would at least try.

“Thadred.” Sair said his name like a plea, like a prayer. She pulled him closer, not letting go. “I’m a grown woman. I don’t play games.”

He knew that. It was one of his favorite things about her.

“And I don’t know where this is going, but I want to find out.” Her voice was soft, barely audible. “I won’t pressure you into anything. I won’t ask anything of you that you aren’t ready to give, but I…” She swallowed again and licked her lips. “I never thought I would feel this way again. Not after…” She cleared her throat and didn’t finish her sentence, but he knew what she had been about to say.

She hadn’t thought she would feel this way after Rhisiart—her son’s father.

Sair was close. So very close. Only their hands touched, but it wouldn’t take much for him to touch more of her, for him to claim more of her.

Thadred was no stranger to lust. They were practically old friends at this point. Thadred was well acquainted with the spark of desire and the inferno of passion, but this was different.

There was desire, yes, but something else, too.

There was something warm and smoldering in Sair. A thing that was patient, steady. A thing that wouldn’t blaze out clean and die after.

She was so beautiful.

He didn’t realize he had leaned down until their lips met. Immediately, Sair responded. She inhaled sharply and pressed against him, her hands tightening around his until her nails dug into his skin. Her lips parted, inviting him in.

There was no shyness or coyness in her kiss. She was bold, but gentle. Soft, but insistent. Her body melded against his, pliant and warm.

For a moment, he lost himself in the feel of her, the taste of her, and the sweet scent of her perfume. Kissing her felt like

the warmth of a hearth after being out in the winter's cold.

It felt like coming home.

Sair deepened their kiss, her chest pressing against his though their hands were still knotted between them. Her breath came in heaves. She wanted this. She wanted *him*.

And Thadred wanted her. Longing lanced through him, making his trousers tighten and his whole body flush with heat.

She broke off first. Her hands gripped his collar, pulling him toward her. "Please," she whimpered. "Wait for me."

Thadred didn't want to wait. He wanted to do this now. He wanted to take her up to his bed and give her the best night of her life.

But Sair was perhaps the one woman he couldn't be so casual with.

A relationship between them wouldn't be just between them. She was an ambassador for her people to the rest of Erymaya. He was now a high-ranking imperial official. There was the balance of budding relations with the Istovari and the empire to consider, not to mention Rhis. Thadred didn't want to come into the boy's life just to disappear in a few months. The kid didn't need that.

"I..." Sair hesitated, misinterpreting his silence. "If it's not too much to ask. I know you have other options, and I might be gone for months—"

Thadred silenced her with another kiss, sealing his lips to hers for just a moment. "I'll wait for you." The promise came without him thinking, without stopping to question it.

"You will?" She sounded as if she hadn't expected that, as if she had fully prepared herself for rejection.

Thadred smoothed his thumb along her lower lip. "Come back to me, Sair."

There were tears in her eyes as she nodded. "I will."

Thadred's chest swelled with some warm emotion. He wasn't happy to see her go, quite the opposite. Neither of them knew how long it might take for the Istovari and King Hyle to reach a final agreement.

But Sair *would* return. Amira would demand it, if nothing else. The empress prized Sair's friendship too highly to do otherwise.

Thadred wrapped Sair in his arms, tucking her beneath his chin. She held onto him, her cheek nestled against his chest.

It felt right to have her in his arms. It felt like he was holding the missing piece of himself, like she filled and smoothed all the broken and jagged places inside him.

He wanted more than this, he wanted quite a bit more than this. But he wanted to do things right this time. If that meant going slow, if that meant waiting, he would do it.

The kelpie nosed at Thadred's arm, wanting more dried beef. Thadred glared at him, and the animal snorted in annoyance, turning away.

Thadred held onto Sair, inhaling her apple blossom perfume and leaving another kiss on her temple. He wished they could stay like this. He wished she didn't have to go or that he didn't have to stay.

But she would come back, he reminded himself. She had promised. He didn't know where this was going any more than she did, but they would have time to find out.

They would have all the time in the world.

Epilogue

Amira

Amira Brindonu Fanduillion, slayer of cythraul, Istovari sorceress, princess of Hylendale, empress of Erymaya, and former assassin watched the steam of her bath rise.

It had been a month since the battle at Mevanmar and in the Dread Marches.

Dried flower petals floated on the water and incense burned from the corners, thanks to the chambermaids. The bath was creamy white with healing goat's milk. Most of her wounds were too old to be helped, but it made her skin soft, which Daindreth had complimented.

She leaned against the side of the massive bathing pool, angling the edge so it pressed against the tight places in her neck.

For weeks, she'd been scrambling, fighting to find ways to deal with Vesha. Now the former empress was gone. The cythraul had been scattered to the corners of the earth. There would be work to do in clearing away the escaped demons, but the urgency was gone. She could take a breath. Rest.

It felt wrong.

She'd been fighting for her life and the lives of her loved ones for so long that peace felt like a trap. But she needed to learn to rest. She needed to learn to just *be*.

Amira sensed *ka* approaching. Several figures stopped outside her apartment, greeted by the ladies in waiting in the foyer. Amira sensed the ladies leave along with most the other figures. Only two remained outside—her guards.

A single source of *ka* entered through her bedroom, coming near the bathing chamber. The door creaked open and then shut.

“You're late.” Amira opened her eyes, looking up.

Daindreth was in a red silk dressing robe loosely tied at his waist, barefoot, and wearing nothing under it as best she could tell. He cocked his head at her accusation. “So I am.”

Amira pulled her legs to her chest and smirked up at him. “You’ll have to apologize for that.”

Daindreth struggled to keep his mouth straight and failed. Grinning, he untied his robe and sloughed it off. “How would you like me to apologize?”

Amira looked him over from head to foot, drinking in the sight of him. Most of his scratches and wounds from the mines were healed. He had a few deeper bites on his thigh that had left pink scars, but that was all that remained.

She beckoned. “Come here.”

Daindreth leapt in, splashing them both and sloshing water over the sides.

“Daindreth!” Amira squealed, devolving into giggles.

He splashed water into her face as he sank down beside her.

Amira raised her arms to shield herself and he pulled them away, kissing her cheeks, forehead, nose, and mouth.

“Forgive me,” he chuckled between kisses. “I am so deeply sorry to have kept you waiting. How could I have done such a thing?”

Amira laughed, squirming as his kisses wandered down her neck, turning into nips along her throat.

“Forgive me, forgive me, forgive me.” Daindreth reached the waterline at her breast and found her nipple in his fingers.

“Daindreth.” Amira gripped his shoulder, her nails digging into his arm. Pleasure tingled through her whole body, skittering down her spine and tightening in the pit of her belly.

He laughed and kissed her cheek. Settling into the water at her side, he leaned back, relaxing into the warmth. He wrapped one arm around her and she snuggled against his side, pressing her cheek to his chest.

Daindreth exhaled a deep breath and tilted his head from side to side, neck cracking. “Nihain will be able to provide rice shipments to the flooded lowlands.”

Amira straightened. “That’s good.”

“It will keep the people from starving over winter,” he said. “That province will still have to be rebuilt. Not to mention we have Yndra to repair and even parts of Hylendale have suffered.”

Amira rested a hand on his chest, the mood suddenly somber. “You’re doing well, my love.”

He stared up at the domed ceiling. “I hope so.”

Amira shifted in the water. “My father has agreed to provide additional timber to Yndra for the repair of their ships.”

“Good.” Daindreth seemed to relax a little more at that.

“The regents of the new Count Flavius have begun the rebuilding of Iandua.” Amira rubbed his arm. “Dowager Countess Zeyna sends her regrets that she was not able to attend your coronation.”

Daindreth nodded. “I didn’t expect her to.”

Count Flavius—Thadred’s younger half-brother—had a local merchant elected as regent since he had no close male relatives in the city. Having a merchant rule a city was unusual, but he was wealthy and respected in that town and it seemed no one liked the alternative—a seven-year-old boy who was still frightened of most loud sounds and suffered nightmares, according to reports.

Few people who had been possessed by cythraul lived to tell the tale. Amira had been keeping an eye on those who had. Four people in particular—a miner, a former prostitute, a child who hadn’t yet spoken to tell her story, and an aged sailor—were now housed with the order of Lumē in the city.

Amira visited with them whenever she could to ask them about the cythraul, about Vesha, and about what exactly had

happened. It was part of her ongoing work with Thadred, Brother Kaphen, and the Istovari sorceresses to answer the *why* and the *how* of what had happened.

She didn't think Vesha would ever be back, but Moreyne was a goddess. She might not seek vengeance in the next year, the next decade, or even in Daindreth and Amira's lifetime. But Moreyne might try to break free again someday and when that happened, Amira wanted future generations to have records, instructions, and tools to stop her.

The world was not meant to suffer demons. Mortals did enough damage to it on their own.

"Baron Boless has requested an Istovari sorceress to serve in his court," Amira added. "I think he's afraid of me."

Daindreth made a noncommittal sound. "I wonder why."

Amira leaned closer to him. "What's wrong, my love? You seem sad."

Daindreth kissed the top of her head. "There's just so much to be done. To be fixed. It's an endless stack of papers and I don't know if I will ever dig to the bottom."

Daindreth was limited by being just one man—one man who had to eat and sleep eventually. He couldn't work endlessly day and night to fix every problem in the empire.

Amira kissed his chest, over his heart. "That's what ministers are for, husband."

"You're right," Daindreth said, in that defeated way. Like he was acknowledging his own inadequacy. "I know, I know." He caught a wet strand of hair and pushed it back behind her ear. His hand lingered on her face, tracing the curve of her cheek and the line of her jaw.

Amira nuzzled his palm.

"Callay suggested I start sleeping alone so that the ministers can begin briefing me as soon as I wake."

Callay was Daindreth's new chamberlain. He was a relic from the reign of Emperor Dreyvan, Daindreth's great-uncle. That meant Callay knew the palace and its traditions better than anyone, but it also meant he treated those traditions with the kind of piety one might expect from a lifelong monk.

"They can start briefing you now," Amira quipped, shrugging. "I don't mind."

"It's not decent, Amira," Daindreth answered mildly.

Amira grinned up at him. "They can hardly get upset when we share a bed."

Daindreth shook his head with a faint smile.

Any nobles who could afford it had separate rooms for husbands and wives. Technically, Daindreth still had his own rooms, but he didn't sleep there.

They'd tried one night together in Daindreth's rooms. Amira had wanted to mix things up more than anything, but Daindreth hadn't been able to fall asleep.

"Take the apartment next to mine," Amira suggested. "We can have a door built in the wall."

Daindreth raised his brows at the idea. "I have considered it."

Amira stroked his chest, admiring the lean muscle on his frame. He didn't look muscular or particularly fit with his clothes on, but when he took them off, one could see his appreciation for sword fighting and horseback riding.

Her hand slipped under the water, and she stroked the length of his manhood.

Daindreth closed his eyes. "Mmm."

Amira nuzzled his shoulder. "Bad dreams still?"

Daindreth shook his head. "I don't have dreams, not really. Only nightmares."

Amira hated that but didn't know how to help him. Her own night terrors no longer haunted her. She no longer woke up screaming. But now Daindreth did.

They had talked some about what had happened in the Dread Marches. It had taken a few weeks, but Daindreth had told her about what had happened to him and Vesha before she and Drystan had arrived. The cythraul had planned to do much worse, but it had still been more than what any person should have to endure.

"I'm sorry," Amira whispered. "I would kill them all if I could."

"I know." Daindreth kissed the top of her head.

When they had first come back to Mynadra, Amira had wanted him close to protect him. Now that their most immediate threat was gone, they slept together for other reasons. Now, he didn't want his servants to be the ones to find out if he woke screaming.

After everything Daindreth had been through...his stolen boyhood, his stolen youth...the cythraul were claiming even more from him.

"What can I do?" Amira whispered.

"Continue being incredible." He cupped his hand and ladled water over her back. "Thank you."

Amira kissed his mouth, gently. She savored the taste of him, the sweet warmth of him. He was everything she'd never dared wish for. Everything she'd never even imagined she'd have.

Daindreth ended their kiss. "Sit in my lap."

Amira complied, leaning with her back against his chest. He wrapped his arms around her, pulling her against him.

He breathed deep. "Any word of Iasu and the others?"

"No," Amira admitted. "Iasu remains imprisoned by my Istovari, though they may move him to King Hyle's dungeons

soon. But no word of the Kadra'han order. Kelamora is still abandoned according to Istovari scouts. We don't know where they are."

"Another loose end to chase down," Daindreth murmured.

"We are working to do it," Amira assured him. "Thadred and I are discussing ways we can hunt down the remaining Kelamora Kadra'han as well as the cythraul. So far, none have shown themselves."

"We need to equip the constables and reeves to fight cythraul," Daindreth said. "And to identify them."

"We do," Amira agreed. "My mother and I have been working on something for that with Cromwell."

"Good, good." Daindreth snuggled her closer. "The gods gave me a gift in you."

Amira rested her hands over his arms. "Sometimes I think this is the repayment for everything we went through. Not just these past few months but before then, too. Everyone is acquainted with some form of misery, but...perhaps we are being rewarded for stopping Moreyne." Amira focused on the feel of Daindreth's warm body against her back. "I don't really know why the gods gave us this. But I want to make the most of it."

There was peace in being this near to him, in being held by him. Amira savored the warmth of the water soaking into her along with the warmth of his presence.

"Mmm." Daindreth kissed her neck. "So do I." He slid one hand down the length of her body. He traced the old scars on her side, the ones from being stabbed by his guards and those from Darrigan's blade what seemed a lifetime ago. "You are precious to me," he murmured against her skin. "So precious to me."

He slid his hand down further and she eagerly parted her legs.

Amira gasped as he began stroking. "I love you."

“I love you, too.” He kissed the top of her shoulder.

With his other hand, he pulled her to lean against him. He kissed her neck and fondled her breasts, whispering gently in her ear. Amira shivered, pleasure swelling within her.

“You are so beautiful,” he whispered. “So beautiful.”

Amira laced her hands behind his head, back arching under his tender ministrations. “Oh.” She moaned in his arms, her breath coming faster as warmth grew deep in her core.

“Yes,” Daindreth murmured, voice low in her ear. “That’s it.” He kissed her temple. “I want to hear you scream.”

When her release came, Amira did scream, writhing in his arms. The water splashed around them, and her voice echoed against the ceiling.

Daindreth held her as she trembled, smothering her in kisses. “That’s it, darling,” he whispered, a smile in his voice. “Good.”

Amira rolled over to curl against his chest.

Daindreth rubbed her back, tucking her under his chin. “I like making you moan.”

Amira giggled, heady with delight. Under the water, he had gone hard, pressing against her. “I think you do like it.”

Daindreth chuckled, a low throaty sound of pleasure. “Yes.”

When she recovered enough, Amira shifted to straddle him. She kissed him long and slow, then pulled back to look him in the eye.

Her heart hammered in her chest. Briefly, nerves fluttered. They had talked about this already, but...

Amira could feel her body rich with *ka*. She would be able to conceive within the week if not today. Not that it was a guarantee. Some women might go a year or more without conceiving. But it *could* happen today.

Amira had never thought about having children before meeting Daindreth. Not practically, anyway. She'd been sure she would end up dead before that time ever came.

When she agreed to marry Daindreth months ago, she had understood what that meant. An emperor needed legitimate heirs, like any other noble. Some people said that was the primary duty of an empress. Neither Daindreth nor Amira strictly agreed with those people, but...

An emperor with heirs was a strong emperor. Legitimate children meant clear succession. People would be more likely to respect Daindreth if they knew they'd have to deal with his son after him.

Having a child would strengthen Amira's stance, too. It would make her the future empress mother and history had taught the empire just how dangerous those could be.

Yet Amira hesitated. It wasn't so much the physical aspect. Amira had seen enough women in her father's palace give birth to not be afraid of that. There was a vulnerability to it, but she had loyal guards, her Istovari, and Thadred, too.

But what if she didn't know what to do with her child? What if her child ended up hating her the way she'd hated her own mother for so long?

Her mother had promised her that she'd become a mother when the time came, but her mother had been wrong before. Both Vesha and Cyne left much to be desired as mothers.

Daindreth stroked her back, understanding in his face. "We don't have to," he whispered. "If you're not ready."

Amira swallowed, staring into his eyes. She pictured those deep brown eyes in a little boy with red hair and a bright smile. A little boy who would grow up not knowing the voice of cythraul, the cut of knives on his arms, or the pain of a Kadra'han's curse.

She did want to meet that little boy. And she knew that Daindreth, for all his patience, wanted a child. More than one.

Amira grasped Daindreth's shaft and pushed him inside her. He let off a low groan as she began to move her hips. She pressed her hands against his chest, pushing him against the side of the pool.

"Give me a baby," she whispered, pressing a kiss to his forehead. "You're going to be a wonderful father."

"I love you so much." Daindreth's eyes glistened on the verge of tears. "You are the whole world to me."

Amira smiled and kissed him again.

They were together. They were safe. Their enemies had all been defeated or scattered.

They had won.

September 2024



A crippled knight.

A widowed sorceress.

And a second chance at love—and revenge.

Born a noblewoman's bastard, Thadred has risen to become High Inquisitor, tasked with hunting escaped cythraul demons across the land. Despite the injuries that left him maimed for life, he has become indispensable to the empire.

Sair was a widowed sorceress who has become one of the Empress Amira's most trusted emissaries and confidantes. A skilled healer and spy, Sair works to ensure peace wherever the empress sends her.

A year ago, Thadred and Sair helped save the world from a fallen goddess, but it's not safe just yet. Unrest ripples through the empire, stray demons lurk in the shadows, and the denizens of a defeated witch still linger.

Now one of those denizens has taken Sair's young son.

Worse, they soon realize the boy's abduction may have more to do with the cythraul demons than anyone thought. Something evil is at work, and Thadred and Sair must stop it before it rains terror on the unsuspecting empire.

***Bastard's Honor* is a second-chance Fantasy Romance that takes place after the events of the *Daindreth's Assassin* series. It will contain heavy spoilers for the *Daindreth's Assassin* series but can be read separately.**

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About the Author



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