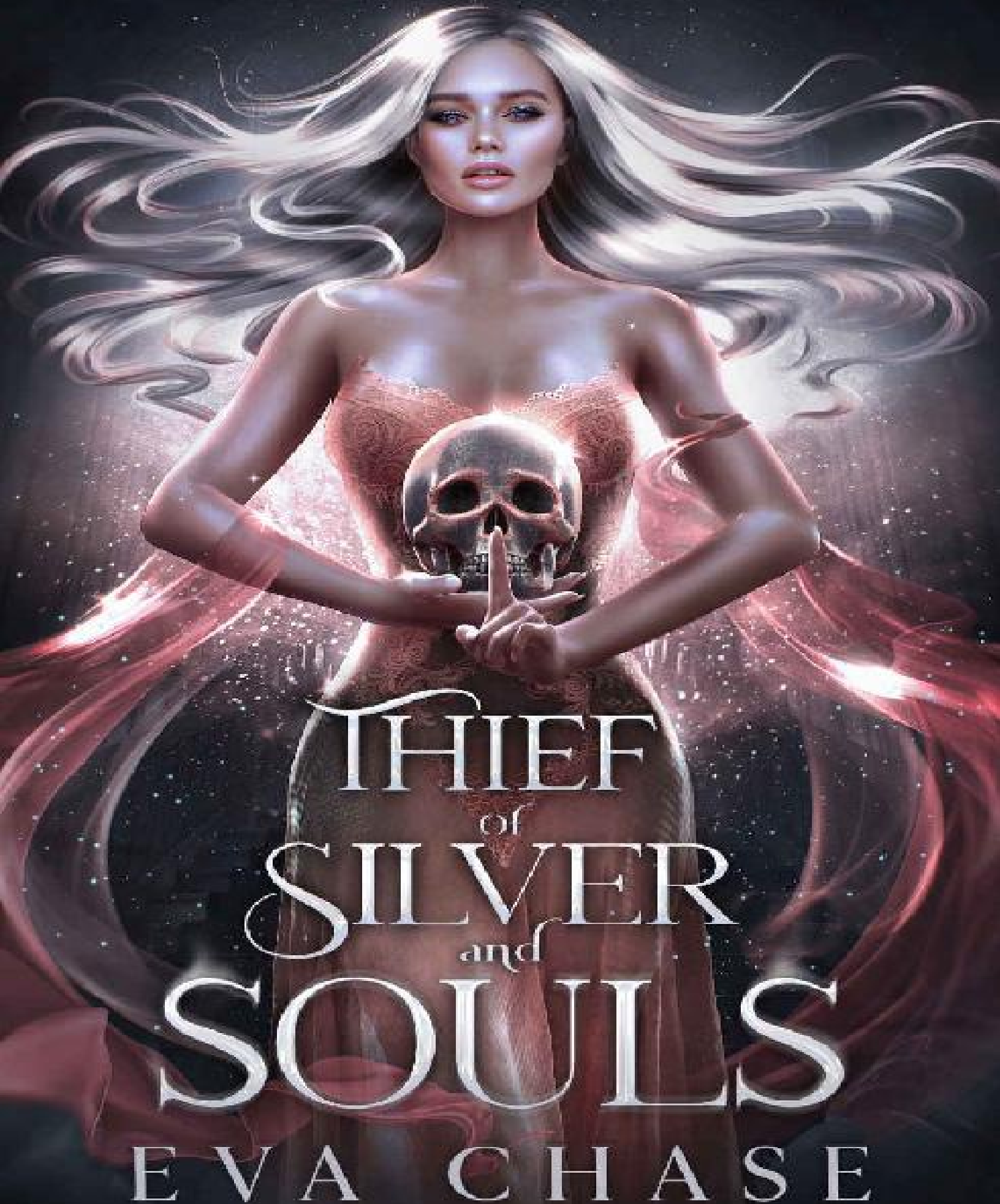


rites of possession book one



THIEF
of
SILVER
and
SOULS

EVA CHASE

THIEF
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SILVER
and
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EVA CHASE



rites of possession - book 1

Thief of Silver and Souls

Book 1 in the Rites of Possession series

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THE GODS OF THE ABANDONED REALMS

THE ALL-GIVER (the Great God, the One) - overseer of all existence, creator of the godlen



THE GODLEN OF THE SKY

Estera - wisdom, knowledge, and education



Inganne - creativity, play, childhood, and dreams



Kosmel - luck, trickery, and rebellion



THE GODLEN OF THE EARTH

Creaden - royalty, leadership, justice, and construction



Prospira - fertility, wealth, harvest, and parenthood



Sabrelle - warfare, sports, and hunting



THE GODLEN OF THE SEA

Ardone - love, beauty, and bodily pleasures



Elox - health, medicine, and peace



Jurnus - communication, travel, and weather



ONE



The scars on my back scrape the wagon's underside through my hooded tunic. I creep onward in my hunched pose, absorbing the prickle of pain.

It's a reminder of where I came from.

The heroes in fables and histories don't scuttle around beneath horse-drawn wagons in the shadows and dirt. They stride forward under the sun to carry out their virtuous deeds.

If the stories are true, you'd figure most of them stood ten feet tall and shone sunlight out of their exalted asses too.

But I'm not any kind of hero. I'm a monster with a broken soul.

I'd like to think that qualifies me to identify other sorts of monsters. Like the charm merchant who owns this wagon, whose soul I'm willing to bet is at least badly smudged.

He's parked off to the side of the ramshackle square on the fringes of the city, and a small crowd has already gathered to ogle his wares. With every false promise that rolls off his lying tongue, my grimace deepens.

The trinkets jingle as he holds up one and another. "Blessed by Elox himself! Keep this charm close, and you'll be free of illness for a year. This one, touched by Prospira's promise—plant it with your gardens for twice the yield."

Sure, and my spit turns shit into gold.

The arid breeze sends a tickle of dust into my nose. I stifle a sneeze and ease even closer to the swarm of legs just beyond the wagon.

The shadows and the dirt-brown fabric of my tunic make me all but

invisible. Just in case, I tug the hood farther over my pale face and tuck back a few stray wisps of my reddish-blond hair.

A voice I recognize speaks up, sweet but thin. “Will the Elox-blessed charm help someone who’s already sick? My son—he’s been down with a fever.”

I wince. It’s Zuzanna—the housewife with the dotted curtains and Elox’s sigil carved into every wall of her rickety house. Her appeals to the godlen of healing haven’t brought any miracles yet. Her frail son is ill more often than he’s not.

But she can’t help grasping at any slim chance she gets.

The merchant answers in a tone slick as oil. “Oh, for one already ill, I have a stronger charm. It only costs a few bits more.”

Murmurs ripple through the gathered onlookers. I can taste the tang of hope in the air—but it’s all in vain.

Charms imbued with godlen-blessed magic exist, but not for the prices at which the merchant is hawking his fakes. The residents of this neighborhood could never afford the real thing.

I’ve crossed paths with legitimate relics a few times, and they give off a thrum of power that quivers right through the center of me. From the trinkets hanging from the display over my head, I sense only a brief tingle.

It’s probably a dusting of conjured happiness that will satisfy the buyers for the first week or two.

A deeper prickle races into my skin whenever the merchant speaks. Most of the scam artists who prey on the city’s poor have gifts of their own: a knack for encouraging trust, a talent for persuasion.

They can always find new customers. Hope is in awfully short supply on these streets. Plenty of people can’t resist the gamble.

I blink, and an image of my father flits behind my eyelids. Years ago, setting a charm on the foot of the bed where Ma lay wasting away.

The sham didn’t so much as quiet her whimpers.

This fraud’s current targets can spare far fewer coins than Da was able to. But Zuzanna is already fishing in her purse.

She’ll be skipping dinner for weeks.

My fingernails dig into my palms. I picture myself leaping out and condemning the fraud directly, but the weight of experience holds me in place.

It’d be nowhere near as simple as popping up to say, “Hello, I’m Ivy,

your hunter of scams. This man is a crook!”

I have no proof I can present to the crowd that will conquer the hope the conman has stirred up. I learned long ago that the guards supplied by city’s elite care more about keeping tax-paying merchants happy than protecting the needy.

And when I try to set things right head-on, there’s too much chance of it going horribly wrong instead. It’s safer for all of us if I stick to the shadows.

I can deal out justice my own way.

As the merchant accepts Zuzanna’s payment, I palm my favorite knife. He drops the smaller coins into the change purse at his hip—and a larger piece of silver into the broader pouch at his back, bulging with the earnings from past sales.

He thinks his money is safer back there, out of reach of the people he can see. A smile curls my lips.

He’s all but handed the loot to me. So kind of him.

The crooks who prey on the fringes of the capital have become warier as word of vanishing money has gotten around. But I never leave an obvious sign of exactly when or where I’ve done my work, and I’ve got a multitude of tricks up my sleeves.

I wait until the merchant turns to face the rest of the onlookers again. With his billowing trousers hiding my slight frame from view, I tip out of the shadows and flick the blade of my knife across the pouch’s side.

As the merchant answers a man’s question about strength-enhancing charms, I give the leather bag a gentle palpitation. Several thick coins, each enough to feed a family for a day, roll from the small hole into my hand.

While I slide my first plunder into a hidden inner pocket by my waist, the merchant swivels to pluck a charm off his display. I hold still, crouched beneath the wagon.

A flash of sapphire blue at the edge of the crowd catches my gaze, and my body goes totally rigid.

Heart thudding, I track the soldier’s stroll toward the wagon. His glossy black boots and trim pants gleam in the late-afternoon sun.

The capital city’s official police force, the Crown’s Watch, doesn’t patrol the outskirts of Florian often. They’re more concerned with protecting the gentlefolk in the buffed stone houses closer to the royal palace.

But if this soldier notices me at work, he’ll feel the need to intervene. And if the Watch gets their hands on me, they might realize there’s a whole

lot more than petty thievery they can charge me with.

One wrong movement will mean a trip straight to the gallows.

The shiny black boots come to a stop less than ten feet away. I grit my teeth, bracing myself to bolt.

Anyone else might pray to the godlen for luck or protection at a moment like this, but the last thing I'll ever want is their attention. Our lesser gods would be the first to punish me for what I am.

I can't even say I wouldn't deserve it.

The hiss of my mother's voice rises up in the back of my mind. *You brought a curse down on our house. It was all you, wasn't it?*

The scars on my back itch. I swallow thickly and shove the memory away.

Maybe I can never make up for the horrors I've committed. Maybe my soul is forfeit. But I need to live if I'm going to write a new story for myself.

I'm never going to be a hero, but when I meet my end, *I want to be sure I was more than a villain.* No matter what anyone else will see when that noose tightens around my neck.

The soldier's voice rings out, arrogant and bored. "No one here's giving you any trouble I hope, good merchant?"

"I've received an excellent welcome," the merchant replies smoothly.

The boots turn. The soldier ambles off, and I gradually let out my breath.

The conman goes on plying his wares. He *is* making good business, cajoling yet another customer into handing over their sparse earnings.

His success makes him confident—and careless. While he deals with a lonely spinster and then a struggling shopkeeper, I massage more coins out of his pouch. Taking the silver a few coins at a time ensures he doesn't register the lightening of the weight at his back.

The crowd thins. I slip a final bunch of silver into one of my pockets before feeding a few handfuls of pebbles into the merchant's pouch to replace what I've stolen.

If he gives the bag a pat, it'll feel suitably full.

May it take him until nightfall to realize that he's lost nearly all of his stash.

With another grim smile, I pull back. I have to slink well clear of the wagon before the merchant sets off.

I'm just drawing my body around when something spooks the horse.

At the gelding's squeal, my head jerks around. He rears, and a brief

twinkle of light darts beneath his flailing forelegs.

It could be a trick of the eye—or it could be a daimon making mischief, as the wandering spirit-creatures so enjoy doing.

I don't have time to contemplate the possibilities, because as the horse's hooves hit the ground, he springs forward, dragging the wagon.

My stomach lurches. In a second, I'll be exposed.

An urge punches me from the inside out, as if an impatient hand has wrenched through me from gut to sternum. It thrusts toward the world outside, determined to fling forth the supernatural power coiled within my body and latch on to the fastest way to save my skin.

No!

I slam down on the impulse with all the self-control I've spent years honing and whip myself around. My back jars against the hard-packed dirt with a pang of my scars, but I'm already heaving upward.

My fingers and the toes of my boots snag on the nooks in the underside of the wagon. Every muscle strains as I cling to the shaky handholds I've caught.

My shortened right forefinger wavers in the air. A half-bit crime lord cut it off at the first knuckle years ago when I hadn't yet learned all the lessons of the streets, but I've never missed that fraction of a digit more.

The wagon jolts with the gelding's next yank. He hurtles forward with a frantic whinny, leaving the charms clattering on their shelves and the merchant cursing. Someone shouts advice from the crowd while a child bursts out laughing.

An ache spreads through my limbs with the effort to hold myself off the ground—and a sharper pain lances through my chest. I clamp my lips against a gasp of agony.

Gods smite me, not again...

The pain ignores my silent plea. It sears up to my shoulders and down to my pelvis, lashing this way and that like a bonfire in the wind.

Fuck, this is even worse than the last time.

I squeeze my eyes shut against the burn of unbidden tears and clutch at the wagon with every ounce of my will. If I can tolerate the agony for a few seconds... a few seconds more...

The wagon careens onward. The magic I refused to use rails at my body, punishing me for my defiance.

One of my feet slips and bounces off the dirt with a fresh burst of pain

through my heel. I fling it back upward—

And the wheels on either side of me grind to a halt.

The biting fire of my magic's resentment gradually fades away while the merchant berates his gelding. The horse stomps his hooves before finally settling.

An ache lingers in my muscles, my fingers throbbing in their desperate hold. I count out several more thumps of my pulse before deciding it's safe to lower myself.

The conman's voice sweetens as he offers apologies to the prospective customers who've followed him down the road. While he beckons the curious over again, I release a shaky breath and scan my surroundings for a viable escape route.

There: a narrow lane between two of the shabby wooden buildings. I roll out on the opposite side of the wagon and dart away before my luck runs out.

When you've been living on the city's streets as long as I have, you can always find your way. The lane leads to an alley which ends at a rubbish heap which connects to another alley.

My heel twinges whenever I set the foot I banged down, but I manage to walk steadily and silently. The tight fabric of my hidden pockets squeezes my bounty close and keeps the coins from jingling.

The sooner I can unload my loot, the less chance someone who doesn't deserve it will make a try for it.

It won't go straight back into the hands of the people the merchant duped today. I have a cycle of rounds throughout the outer wards so that I'm distributing my spoils evenly.

I dodge a pool of piss at one corner and skirt a pile of poisoned rat corpses at another. A pungent stink seeps through the rest of the awful smells, welcoming me to my destination.

The neighborhood of Slaughterwell got its name from the slaughterhouses where the farmers bring their livestock, which stand just beyond the nearby city wall. Even at night, the reek never quite fades.

No one lives here unless they can't find a way to live anywhere else.

As I walk on, the power inside me nibbles at the edges of my awareness with a cajoling tone that reminds me of the fraud merchant.

If I let the magic out, it could wash away the stench. It could carry me straight to my destination without my taking another step.

That might be true, I retort. But what will you ruin in the meantime?

It doesn't have an answer to that.

Brief nips of pain quiver through my nerves, but nothing I can't tune out. The magic only really lashes out when I've refused a particularly good reason to use it.

The fits of agony only started a year ago... and they've become more frequent and intense by the month. I don't want to think too hard about what that might mean for my future.

Around me, the taller wooden buildings give way to smaller but equally lopsided shacks. Here and there, twists of stems and errant leaves poke from gaps where vegetation has merged with the frames.

Every neighborhood has a few eager gardeners who've sacrificed a bit of themselves in exchange for a gift of encouraging plants. Trading favors so they'll coax a sapling or a shrub into patching up a deteriorating building is often cheaper than buying the supplies and skills for a more traditional fix.

Half of these buildings would be heaps of debris if not for the intertwined plants holding them steady.

When I reach the row of houses I'm aiming for, I veer into the dingy back gardens. I'd rather no one can ever identify the person behind my anonymous donations.

At each home, I leave a small stack of coins on a window ledge. Here and there, I glance through the ragged curtains at the signs of life within.

At Marta's house with the drooping shingles and the tufts of thistledown protruding along the edge of the roof, I hear a familiar grunt. Beyond the bedroom window, the avid lover rocks with some new man. He ruts into her as she arches back against the sheets.

Her eager moan sets off an unwelcome pulse of heat between my legs. She sounds like she's having a much more thrilling time than any of my hasty roll-about have given me.

Of course, I haven't exactly had a broad selection of potential partners. It's been a couple of years since the last time I dared get that close to anyone.

I slink on to the next house, shedding the pinch of longing the private image brought. One by one, I leave coins for Bogusi the cook, Anielle the seamstress, and Oska the butcher's assistant.

These people have never properly met me, but I've spent years watching over them. Sharing their joys and sorrows in snippets of conversations overheard.

They're the closest thing I have to a family now—a very large family,

even if they barely know I exist.

At the last house in the row, two little girls scamper around the patchy yard. I crouch by the refuse bin, the previous pinching sensation expanding to squeeze my heart.

The younger girl trips and tumbles across the gritty soil. At her yelp, I sway forward and then catch myself.

It isn't my place to jump in. I'm helping in my own way—the way that doesn't risk anyone getting more hurt than they already are.

The older girl has already dashed to her sister's side. "It's okay. Let's get a bit of water to wash the scrape."

I remain frozen until they vanish through the back door. Then I breeze by as stealthily as a spirit, leaving an extra coin in the stack on their window.

But as I pause at the crossroads, a hollow forms in the pit of my stomach. My hand lifts of its own accord to my left arm, where I keep the ivory ribbon tied just above my elbow.

Is anything I do now really enough?

I jerk my fingers to one of my still-full pockets, forcing a grin to chase away my unsettled emotions. I'm accomplishing more than nothing, anyway. I've seen the glimmers of happiness a few extra coins can spark.

I head across the street to the next row of houses. As I reach a low fence around a garden, a cry splits the air from farther up the road.

A rough, pained cry cut off an instant later with a gurgle.

My feet stall, my gut twisting. A shriek like that can't mean anything short of horrific.

But I don't get involved—not directly. If I try to step in...

I know how much horror *I* can bring about even when I want to do the right thing.

That thought—the thought that's held me back a thousand times before—crosses my mind, and my gaze snags on the trickle of liquid seeping over the dirt road from an alleyway. The fading sun lights it crimson.

Blood.

My feet move without consulting the rest of me. I sprint toward the alley even as both my head and my heart tangle up with indecision.

I'm not supposed to intervene. Not like this—not when my control might slip—

There has to be *something* I can do with just my hands and the skills I've learned. I know how to stop bleeding, how to bind a wound. I—

I throw myself into the alley and skid to a halt just before I smack into the body slumped there.

It's a woman, glossy chestnut hair scattered around her pale, blood-flecked face. Her dark cloak has fallen away from a violet silk dress that manages to shimmer even amid the grime of the alley. Gold glints at her wrist.

Someone like her doesn't belong *here*. She—

She's bleeding out from a gash where a knife's stabbed into the side of her neck.

Snapping out of my shock, I drop to my knees and press my fingers to the wound around the blade. Yanking the knife out will only make the blood flow faster.

Not that it's flowing at all slowly as it is.

The woman's eyelids flutter. She's still alive, however many fleeting seconds she has left. Her life is gushing away in a pulsing torrent beneath my useless hands.

My magic resonates through my limbs, prickling into my bones. My posture stiffens against it.

No. The power inside me can't save a life.

I know *that* better than I know anything in my whole damned existence.

The noblewoman's lips part, but nothing comes out except another sputter of blood. Gods above, she doesn't look any older than my twenty years.

My gaze locks with hers beneath her twitching eyelids. She stares back at me with desperate intensity.

I open my mouth to stammer some kind of apology, as if anything I can say would make up for the dire end she's about to meet... and the whole world spins.

My vision grays. A whirl of images floods my consciousness.

Stone towers. Crumpled papers. Piles of books on a table.

Spinning dresses in a rainbow of colors. A reflection preening in a mirror.

Four men. Four men standing around a desk, each of them so striking I don't know where to look first.

One impossibly tall and brawny, with hair the same dark red as the blood I've been trying to stanch.

Another warm and grinning wide as his tawny waves swoop over deep green eyes.

The third with a sharply bright gaze behind the polished mask that covers

most of his bronze-brown face.

The last with a wry smirk curling his rosy lips beneath the fall of his sun-kissed hair.

All of them are gazing back at me, so avidly my nerves shiver as if a bolt of lightning has crackled through me.

The bolt blazes right through my skull, hazing my mind white and then black and then—

I drag in a hitch of breath as I come back to myself, gaping down at the woman in the silk dress.

Her eyes have hazed. Her body lies motionless, her skin waxen. Even her eyelids have frozen in place.

What under the gods' gaze just happened?

A shout travels from somewhere down the street. Footsteps pound toward me.

My pulse stutters. I glance over the noblewoman, but death emanates from every inch of her body.

She's gone. There's nothing I can do for her.

I can only make sure I don't follow the same path.

I shove to my feet and run.

Two



Even after I've left the noblewoman's gory corpse far behind me, my heart keeps beating too fast.

I hunch down at the edge of one of the stone-lined culverts that wind from the Starsil River. My hands shake as I rub the blood off them.

I suck in the sour air and will my nerves to settle. It's over now.

It was none of my business anyway. I didn't even know her.

And it isn't as if I'm a stranger to death. I've witnessed it more times than I care to count.

I've dealt it out myself, wittingly or not.

But something about that moment when her gaze bored into mine leaves a lingering uneasiness that I can't totally shed.

So, I simply ignore it. I straighten up, give the soles of my leather boots a quick rinse as well, and check my tunic and breeches.

A few speckles of blood hit my sleeves, but they're barely discernable in the dirt-brown linen. There've been plenty of days I've gotten more soiled.

If anything, I got off easy.

I can't quite convince myself to laugh. It's as if I can feel the noblewoman still staring at me.

When I touch my pockets to confirm I haven't lost my remaining loot, a strange lump meets my fingers at my hip. I fish inside the pocket and pull out a delicate chain.

A bracelet.

The metal links glint gold in the dwindling sunlight. They hold a thin gold bar imprinted with a few abstract shapes that don't match any symbols I

know and two small red gems on either side. Rubies, I'd wager.

I study the bracelet for a minute, my body tensed. I must have taken it off the noblewoman.

I don't *remember* pilfering her jewelry. Maybe my thieving instincts kicked in and my hand moved of its own accord during the brief spell when I blanked out?

If I hadn't taken the bracelet, whoever found her body probably would have. I can wait a few weeks to make sure there's no furor around her death and then see if I can hawk it without drawing unwanted attention.

But I'd rather not have it at all. In these neighborhoods, a piece this expensive makes a person an automatic target.

I was trying to *save* her, not steal from her.

At least, that's what I thought I was doing. No matter how much good I try to do...

My stomach lurches. I shove the bracelet back into my pocket.

It's a problem for another day. I have other tasks to finish.

Returning to my planned donation route doesn't seem like the wisest idea when I had a very good reason for fleeing. I consider my mental map of the city and decide I'll skip ahead to the edge of Slaughterwell. I can double back for the families I missed in a few days when I've got more bounty.

Having a clear plan boosts my spirits. I hop across the culvert and follow its curving path to more rows of drooping houses.

Here and there, I dodge the tiny dishes left out by doorways. Even though the people of Slaughterwell don't have much, many never fail to offer tidbits of fruit or dried meat to the local spirit-creatures.

I don't think anyone has ever witnessed a daimon partaking of the edible endowments. Common thought is that even if the invisible beings that flit through our lives in their chaotic ways never touch the stuff and it's only stray cats and dogs chowing down, they appreciate the generosity all the same. They might treat the households that made the gesture with more kindness in their rambling folly.

Maybe if the charms merchant had offered more respect, they'd have left his horse alone.

I have just enough coins left for my own generosity to make it to one of my favorite homes. The faint buzzing of bees tickles my ears before I reach the gnarled oak that juts up on the border between two small gardens.

As I set the last stack of silver on the back windowsill, a giggle tinkles

from just beyond the rear door. I dart back to the shelter of the tree, a smile springing to my lips.

While the door creaks open, I scale the twisted branches. My fingers brush the soft leaves of the ivy that loops around them.

It was this vine that inspired my chosen name, years ago on an evening like this.

I sprawl out on the branch that's become my regular perch. From that vantage point, I have a view through the oak's leaves down into Ewalin's yard.

Ewalin and her mother, Frida, stroll over to the hutch that holds the beehive. As Ewalin lifts the lid, Frida hangs back with a teasing shake of her head. "I swear those creatures are twice as unnerving in the dark."

Ewalin laughs. "Doesn't stop you from wanting their honey in your tea, though, does it?"

As she reaches into the hutch, she hums under her breath. The stump of her little finger, cut off halfway down its length, gleams pale against her deep brown skin.

Unlike my severed finger, Ewalin gave up hers voluntarily. Every mortal gets one chance to ask for a gift of magical talent at twelve years old, when they dedicate themselves to a godlen. But such a gift requires a sacrifice in return.

I've heard Ewalin talk wryly about her dedication ceremony. She asked Prospira, the godlen of agriculture and abundance, for sway over animals, but she was too nervous to offer up much of herself. So she can't easily cajole horses or pigs or even chickens, but she does well with bees.

It's not a bad gift for half a finger. She can only manage one hive, but it produces enough honey to supplement the family's meager income.

Ewalin draws out her spoon holding a small lump of honey. She dips it straight into the mug her mother has cupped in her hands.

As she stirs, Frida smiles. "Ah, a few stings would be worth it for the sweetness."

Ewalin clicks her tongue. "They've never stung you. They're good little mites."

"They are. And so are you." Frida winks at her daughter. Then her voice drops low. "Did you hear about the ants that got into Soral's house?"

"Hmm, no. Did her 'whimsical' baking style finally catch up with her?"

As they fall into their usual pattern of neighborhood gossip, I rest my chin

on my folded hands. Most of the lingering uneasiness from my bloody encounter earlier fades away with the rhythm of their affectionately amused voices.

I first stumbled on the pair of them nearly eight years ago, when I'd only been on the streets for a few months and hadn't yet figured out how to be anything but an urchin. My twelve-year-old self perched in this tree and watched the two of them banter and share stories, and I imagined I might somehow drop into their lives and they'd take me in as one of the family.

That would be something, wouldn't it? To have a mother or a grandmother, or people like them, who laughed with me and whispered silly confidences?

Then Frida says, "Where's that son-in-law of mine gotten to this late?"

Ewalin raises her eyebrows. "You didn't know? Word went round that soldiers caught a riven sorcerer in one of the outer provinces. They brought him in to be executed tonight. Darek wanted to see it."

She gives a little shudder and taps her hand down her front in the gesture of the divinities: three fingers to the forehead, heart, and gut before fisting her hand over her sternum. "I'd rather not be near one of those fiends."

Frida's mouth tightens in sympathetic agreement. "It's a gruesome business all around. But it makes some people feel better seeing with their own eyes that the king is dealing with the menace."

My pulse has leapt to rattle in the base of my throat. An execution tonight? I managed to miss any mention of the arrested sorcerer before now.

In the startled scattering of my thoughts, a rush of dizziness sweeps through me. My gut tips over, and my chin bobs. My hands clamp around the branch instinctively to keep my balance.

With a shake of my head, I manage to clear it. I must still be thrown off by the dead woman to be so unsettled by the news.

Frida and Ewalin are meandering back toward the house now. Ewalin spots the glint of silver at the window.

"Oh, we've been visited by the Hand of Kosmel!" She snatches up the coins. "They couldn't have come at a better time."

A twinge that's both uneasy and exhilarating passes through my gut. I've never encouraged the title many of the outer-warders have given to the mysterious figure who leaves donations of questionable origin by their windows. I'm not sure I like being referred to as a mere appendage of a divine figure I'd prefer never noticed me, even if the godden of trickery might

not be quite as disapproving as his siblings.

But the fact that they've given me a name at all makes me feel a little more present in their lives.

When Ewalin and Frida have shut the door behind them, I slip down from the oak. With a mind to the upcoming execution, I hop over the fence and set off for the center of the city.

Hitching a surreptitious ride on the back of a carriage just returning to the city shaves a lot of time off the trek. I hop off just before we reach the inner wards.

After skirting the back of several buildings and slinking down a few alleys, I emerge onto Florian's busiest commercial street.

In my first glimpse of this place, the blare of sound and color is always a shock to the senses. The glow of a multitude of lanterns, some fueled by oil or wax and others by magic, glances off the stone faces of the tall buildings lining the wide street, all of which are painted in varying pastel hues.

Conjured images posture and swirl over many of the doorways, enticing customers with visions of what awaits them inside each shop and eatery. A translucent gown swishes its skirts here; wine bubbles in a row of illusionary glasses there.

And plenty of customers churn along the cobblestone road, peering through windows and chattering with their companions. To my left, a minstrel lends his voice and lute to the clamor; farther to my right, I spot another gliding her fingers over a harp.

A flood of scents assaults my nose alongside the sights and sounds. The stink that permeates Florian's fringes creeps through the air even here, but it's mostly drowned out by wafts of savory cooking and sugary pastries alongside musky and floral perfumes.

I've ventured into the gilded core plenty of times. The impact is intense but not surprising.

So it shouldn't send me into another dizzy spell, my feet abruptly tipping on the smooth cobblestones beneath my boots.

I stumble and slap my hand against the building next to me to hold myself steady. A lurch of queasiness passes through my gut.

As I rub my forehead, the dizziness passes like it did before. But this time it leaves a knot in my stomach.

What's wrong with me? Am I coming down with some illness?

I swallow down the chill of fear that sparks at that thought and look at the

facts. I haven't eaten since the morning. Anyone would be lightheaded.

It's nothing more than that.

I'm carrying a few coins I reserved for myself. I'll buy myself a quick dinner, as little as I want to eat when thinking about what's happening next, and my body will sort itself out just fine.

The execution can't be starting just yet. The street is too crowded—with an unusual mix of polished inner-warders and scruffier figures who, like Ewalin's husband, have ventured from the fringes just for tonight.

They're passing the time while they wait for the main event.

I pick out a small bakery with stuffed dumplings on display in the window and a pale illusion of steaming rolls wavering over the door. As I weave toward it, I notice two kids peering in through the front window: a girl with her hand on the younger boy's shoulder.

From their shabby clothes and smudged faces, they don't live in these parts. They must have come for the spectacle and drifted to the bakery at the pang of their stomachs.

The boy presses his hand to the glass, and a woman with wiry gray curls and a flour-dusted apron storms out of the building.

"Get out of here," she snaps at the kids, giving the girl a shove and managing to backhand the little boy in the same motion.

The kids scurry off with their heads ducked low, and my teeth set on edge.

I *was* going to pay for this meal like the upstanding citizen I can pretend to be. But why should I give any of my hard-won silver to a shrew like that?

There are other ways to get what I want. I'll just have to play an even more upstanding citizen than I already intended to.

I flick back my linen hood and whip out the gauzy maroon shawl I keep folded at the small of my back, covering my hair with more role-appropriate finery. It's only a cheap imitation of silk, but it passes just fine in this kind of lighting.

A pinch of my cheeks should bring a little healthy color into my sallow skin. On an impulse, I slip the gold bracelet I didn't mean to steal around my wrist as well, willing away the twinge of guilt.

With my chin lifted at a haughty angle, I march into the bakery on the heels of the baker.

She turns to face me. Before she can say a word, I fold my arms over my chest and announce, "Radir Micramek requests a dozen of your finest

dumplings.”

The baker blinks at me, her lips parting in surprise. Her gaze darts over my clothing. “You—you work for Master Radir?”

I narrow my eyes. “He prefers that his assistants avoid drawing unnecessary attention. But he feels it’s time your establishment was evaluated. Will you comply, or must I inform him that you’ve refused him?”

The time I’ve spent listening in on conversations here in the inner wards has been well worthwhile. Radir is little known outside of culinary circles, but I happened to learn a couple of years ago that he’s one of the royal advisors on cuisine. Specifically, he keeps an eye on all the eateries in the central ward.

A good word from him could have the royal household partaking of your wares. A bad word, and you’ll be shut down.

Simply dropping the name is nearly enough to sell the story when I nail the snotty attitude too. For good measure, I tilt my arm slightly so the gold bracelet shows past the edge of my sleeve.

The baker’s eyes catch on it, and she licks her lips nervously.

She isn’t totally sure I’m telling the truth, but most people who know of Radir wouldn’t be the type to pull a con on her. Pissing off my supposed employer will hurt a lot more than losing a few dumplings.

Less than a minute later, I’m striding out of the bakery with my edible loot in hand. I cross the street, tucking away the shawl and bracelet and scanning the crowd.

The two kids the baker chased off are crouched at the mouth of an alley, their heads bent close together as they murmur to each other. I pop one of the dumplings into my mouth—fuck, that *is* good—and come to a stop by a statue of a long-dead queen, just a couple of paces away from them.

“Such a pity I’ve got more than I can eat myself,” I say in the direction of the alley, without actually looking at them.

I tuck a few more dumplings into my pockets and set the bag with the rest at the base of the statue, right in the kids’ line of sight. Then I walk away, melding into the mass of passersby.

At the edge of my vision, I see the girl snatching up the bag. Something in my gut untwists.

One small thing in this world has been set a little more right.

The peal of the palace bell rings out, signaling the ninth hour. Echoes reverberate from other official buildings farther out through the city.

With an excited murmur, people start to veer toward the execution site. I gulp down two more dumplings as I follow them.

With each step closer to the Temple of the Crown, the hum of magic thickens in the air. Most people can't feel it, but it wriggles through the cracks in my soul and sets all my nerves jangling.

Lucky me.

What appetite I still had dies. I gird myself before I turn the corner onto the wide thoroughfare that leads up Florian's steep central hill to the largest temple in the country of Silana.

A decent crowd has already gathered in the courtyard out front. The Temple of the Crown looms over them all. The building of the gods that's sponsored by the royal family couldn't be anything but imposingly grand.

Its marble towers stretch up toward the darkened sky. There are three slightly shorter ones at the three corners, each with three golden spires representing the godden of sky, sea, and earth, and one in the center I have to crane my neck to take in. The single spire of the All-Giver looks as if it could pierce the clouds.

Behind it, a little higher up the hill, two other massive buildings jut their towers toward the sky: the palace and the royal college. They glower in darkened silhouettes beyond the sheen of the temple's pale walls.

As I hurry up the sharp incline, several soldiers of the Crown's Watch come into view. They strut around the wooden platform that holds the gallows, set up off to the side of the temple's broad front doorway.

It'll have been assembled the moment the clerics knew the execution was scheduled, to serve as an announcement of what's to come. And now it's almost time.

My pulse hitches. I dart the rest of the way to the courtyard and slip between the milling spectators to the vantage point I've used before.

Most of the crowd stands taller than me, but that's not a problem. There's a shallow alcove between two of the stately buildings facing the temple. It's so dark I may as well disappear once I step into it, with a ledge at waist height that's just big enough to hold my feet.

I brace my hands against the walls on either side to hold myself upright and peer out over the heads of the other watchers.

A drumbeat starts to roll out from some spot I can't see, reverberating through me alongside the temple's magic. The raucous voices of the crowd dwindle into an ominous hush.

The soldiers station themselves around the platform with its dangling noose. The rap of boots against the cobblestone indicates more approaching.

Ten march forward, a single slumped figure swaying along between them. A sack covers his head and chains bind his arms to his chest, but we all know who he is. What he is.

I know better than anyone, because I'm watching the fate that awaits me someday too.

THREE



The procession of soldiers jerks to a halt. They pivot to face their audience.

The guards on either side of the sorcerer yank him around, clamping him in place as his feet tangle beneath him.

As long as they're alive, nothing's been discovered that can remove or shut away the magic of the riven. The authorities drug the sorcerers into a stupor from the moment they catch them so they don't have the wits to focus their power.

With an unclouded mind, the man in the sack and chains could murder every living being in this courtyard in a matter of seconds. Men and women like him *have* murdered thousands in the past in their attempts to evade capture... or simply because it served their mad purposes.

Sorcerers like us didn't ask for our magic. We're not limited to a single gift. The power flows through our broken souls if we answer the call, more than any mortal could know what to do with.

More than any mortal can indulge in and keep their right mind.

All magic requires sacrifice, after all. For every act that prisoner carried out with his, his power took its payment.

If you want health, someone else must fall ill. If you want to prosper, others will go without.

And you don't get to choose who suffers the penalty.

There's nothing I want enough to ignore the consequences of giving my magic free rein. I've already lost enough to it.

As long as I resist, I can hope that I never get to the point where I don't

even care who I hurt, as this man must have.

The soldiers drag the sorcerer onto the platform. They position him just in front of the dangling noose, his bare feet on the trap door. His head droops within the sack.

It's a little mad that the king and his royal clerics parade the riven in front of a vulnerable crowd. I'd imagine they make very certain their prisoner is totally addled before marching them out.

They feel the risk of people fearing that the feral sorcerers are rampaging unchecked is worse. And no doubt they enjoy showing off their power, that they brought this monster under control.

Every riven sorcerer captured throughout Silana is brought to the capital for their public execution, under the eyes of the royal family.

A brighter glow expands across the balcony at the top of the temple's central wall, high above its arched doorway. All the voices in the courtyard fall totally silent.

In the yellowish conjured light, I make out the majestic figures of King Konram and Queen Ishild, flanked by their two living children, Princess Klaudia and Prince Jacos, and two of the highest-ranking clerics.

The royal family is all dressed in the deep purple associated with Creaden, the godlen of leadership and justice who blesses the royal line. Both of the teenaged royals stand with elegance equal to their parents, their dark brown hair that matches their father's gathered beneath their more modest crowns.

Years younger than me, and they've already accepted their duty in presiding over these killings.

The eerie lighting brings out the king's sharp features—his prominent nose and jutting chin. His commanding baritone courses over us.

“My people. You have come to witness the end of one of the riven. I have nothing but sorrow in my heart for the harm he carried out, but immense gratitude that we can subdue the danger before any more lives are lost and livelihoods destroyed.”

A cheer rises up from the swarm of spectators. My voice stays locked in my throat.

King Konram waits until the clamor has fallen away to continue speaking. “It has been nearly two years since we last put down such a villain. I believe this indicates that their numbers are dwindling—fewer souls born riven, fewer remaining among us. I have hope that I will see the day when we

no longer need to fear their presence at all.”

The audience outright roars their approval.

I adjust my hands against the gritty stone walls, but the ache that’s spreading through the muscles in my shoulders isn’t quite as uncomfortable as the one expanding in my chest.

One of the clerics steps forward, the light illuminating her multi-colored robe. She rests her hands on the wall at the edge of the balcony.

Her voice rings out clear as crystal. “Five centuries ago, our realms turned on our All-Giver and the Great God’s godlen. The riven souls among us are part of the penance we pay. With each abomination we cut down, we prove our devotion to the One who made us. May the All-Giver see and return to smile on us once again.”

A more muted cheer lifts to meet that plea. No one, noble or lowborn, likes to think about the disgrace that left our realms abandoned by the omnipotent divinity who once guided us.

The cleric draws back beside her companions. The king makes a small motion, and one of the soldiers next to the prisoner pulls the sack from the sorcerer’s head.

The face he exposes looks sallow and doughy with the effects of the stupefying drug. Straggly black hair droops across the man’s forehead and cheeks.

If “man” is even quite the right word. From this distance in the hazy light, it’s difficult to judge his age, but I’m not sure the hunched figure at the noose is even out of his teens. He could be as young as Princess Klaudia.

As the soldiers fit the loop of rope around the sorcerer’s neck and tighten it, my throat constricts as if a noose of my own presses against it. My stomach churns.

But I don’t let myself look away.

This is my most likely future. This man—or boy—has a soul just like mine.

I’ve escaped punishment for my crimes while he stands up there. The least I can do is bear witness.

The soldiers retreat. The sorcerer’s shoulders sag as if he can barely hold himself up.

Up on the balcony, the royal family and the clerics tap their foreheads and torsos in the three-fingered gesture of the divinities.

Then someone yanks the lever.

The trap door pops open, and the prisoner plummets. His body jerks as the noose catches his fall.

Even drugged into oblivion, a hanged person's limbs still shudder and spasm. The sorcerer's feet kick involuntarily before going slack.

He sways on the end of the rope, more like a broken doll than a human being now.

Did the first impact snap his neck? Or is his brain still fizzing beneath the drugs as the rope cuts off his breath?

This is the tenth execution of a riven I've watched, and I can never tell.

After a minute, the crowd begins to stir. One soldier checks the body and nods to confirm that the sorcerer is dead. The others ease back to allow curious citizens to approach the platform.

Some of the spectators clamber right onto the boards to prod the corpse, as if they need to feel with their own hands that the monster is vanquished. I see one woman spit on the slumped, purpled head.

Bile burns in the back of my mouth. I've witnessed enough.

I hop down from my perch and slip away through the throng. Keeping my hood drawn low over my hair, I pad through the thickest shadows away from the city core.

A thick, mossy stone wall marks the border between the neighborhoods of the have-much and the have-less in the most concrete way possible. The crumbling structure was once the outer wall of the city, when Florian was just establishing itself as an urban center.

Once enough peasants had gathered and constructed homes in the lands beyond the original wall, the royal family of times past saw fit to erect a new, taller wall to fully encompass the city's growth. No one's maintained the old wall in centuries other than to ensure no blocks fall right off onto the head of a passing noble.

The many gates through the original wall have had their doors removed, and citizens traveling through are no longer *officially* monitored. But one or two of the Crown's Watch are almost always hanging around near them, happy to badger anyone they deem suspicious-looking.

To avoid any potential hassle, I prefer to simply go over the top. In plenty of places, a well-situated shed or shrubbery makes for an easy scramble across the stones.

A few streets beyond the wall, I reach the building that contains a cloth-making business and my home, as much as I can call the place where I sleep

that.

The three floors where workers weave, dye, and store reams of linen and wool lie silent for the night. I clamber up the rusting ladder at the back, meant as an escape route in case of fire, and spring from there to the lip at the top of the third story.

A brief scoot to the side, and I'm at the shuttered attic window that's just large enough for me to squeeze my scrawny frame through.

The sprawling attic is cluttered, but I know it well enough to navigate the stacks of boxes and abandoned furniture by only the faint streaks of moonlight that seep around the shutters. I've helped myself to enough of the factory's discards to create a mattress of heaped wool that's decently comfortable, with a linen sheet and a patchy wool blanket.

A few emptied boxes turned on their side serve as a series of shelves. I wriggle out of my tunic, trading it and my breeches for a nightshirt, and fold them to set next to my meager assortment of clothes.

I consider the remaining dumplings, but my stomach balks, so I set them onto a different shelf next to my stash of nuts and dried berries. They'll make a perfectly good breakfast.

My gaze slides through the dimness across the hills of boxes still full of their original contents. The books I've retrieved from those boxes stand in uneven stacks on the floor in between.

Sometime before the cloth-makers took over the building, it must have housed a scholarly business. A business that didn't bother taking much with it when the owners left.

Either they or the new residents simply shoved loads of books and barely bound papers up here to forget about. In my explorations over the years, I've found everything from historical records to philosophic texts to fanciful invented tales.

Stumbling on this bounty is one of the few bits of good luck I can point to in my life. The books keep me company about as well as the people I watch over do.

And every bit of information I can stuff into my head, every additional understanding I can absorb, puts me one more step ahead of ever needing to use my magic. Of making others pay for my power. Of going mad with it like the riven always do.

Of ending up on a wooden platform with a noose around my neck.

The image of the execution fills my mind, and my body tenses.

On a normal night, I might light a small candle in a sheltered spot where the glow won't carry to the window and read a few more chapters of my latest tome, but I'm not in the mood to feed my imagination any more than my stomach right now.

Today I've seen two deaths more than I ever want to in a day. As different as the circumstances were, both memories gnaw at my gut.

I stretch my arms, set my favorite knife by the corner of the makeshift mattress, and wriggle under the covers of my bed. I'm not sure how easily I'll get to sleep, but I should at least try.

I've got to be out of here before the workers show up in the morning.

The day's events swim through my mind, as jumbled as the attic around me. Fresh threads of uneasiness wind through my nerves despite my best efforts to relax.

I'm about to push upright and see if a little reading will dull the lingering tension after all when a feminine voice speaks, as loud and clear as if it's coming from right beside my ear.

"This is where you live?"

FOUR



I jolt to my feet in an instant, my fingers closing around the hilt of my knife. I swing it toward the spot where I assumed the speaker was crouched... but the blade only slices through empty air.

My gaze jerks over the room around me. I can't see any figure in the entire room, let alone right by my side.

My pulse bangs so loudly I can barely hear my own ragged whisper. "Who's here? What do you want?"

A light chuckle fills my head... giving the impression that it is actually coming from within my head.

The firm but sultry voice I heard before reaches me the same way, seeming to echo inside my skull rather than coming from beyond my ears. *I simply thought we should talk, seeing as I can't get anything done any other way.*

My grip tightens on the knife handle, but what am I going to do with it? Stab it into my own brain? That's not going to help me.

There are people dedicated to Jurnus—the godlen who presides over communication—who sacrificed enough to request the gift of mind-to-mind speech. Could that be what this unseen woman is doing? She's somewhere nearby though out of sight, projecting her thoughts into my head?

If so, I need to figure out just how close she is so I can track her down and bring the conversation face to face.

I adjust my position so I can quickly spring off the folds of woolen fabric. My voice dips low—so low no one not in the room with me could possibly hear. "If you want to talk so badly, why don't you show yourself like a

normal person would?”

Another brief laugh tinkles through my head. *Believe me, I wish I could arrange that. Unfortunately it appears that all that's left of me is terribly ephemeral.*

She caught the question—she's got to be somewhere in the attic. I push to my feet and prowl slowly through the shadows, watching for any sign of movement, any object I might recognize has been displaced.

What are you doing? the voice asks with a tinge of amusement that annoys me. *You can't find me; I'm already right here.*

“What do you mean?” I say through gritted teeth. “Where are you?”

Inside you, as far as I can tell.

Even in my tense state, I can't help rolling my eyes. “I can tell you're projecting your voice there. Where's the rest of you?”

This is pretty much all of me at this point. The body you're looking for, you left in a pool of blood in that putrid alley.

I draw up short with a sharper hitch of my pulse. She knows about the murdered noblewoman—she saw me there. Is this blackmail?

The voice continues on, unfazed by my silence. *Not that I can blame you. I wouldn't have wanted to dally around that scene either. Although it'd have been nice if you'd at least stayed close enough to check whether the villain who murdered me came by to gloat.*

My jaw goes slack for a second before I snap my mouth shut again. The words snag in my throat before I force them out. “Your murderer...?”

Yes. Let's keep up. Some ruthless miscreant had me slaughtered in a gods-forsaken alley, you ever-so-heroically if futilely raced to my rescue, and somehow or other when my soul left my body, it ended up in yours.

Her way of speaking does sound like a noble. Would it really make sense for there to have just happened to be *another* noblewoman, one with telepathic magic, hanging around in Slaughterwell to watch me stumble on that body and then managing to follow me all across the city for the rest of the day?

I press my free hand to my forehead. What sense does it make that a dead woman's soul could have taken up residence in my head? I've never heard of that happening to anyone.

No matter how I look at this situation, it's a whole lot of fucking impossible.

“How could your soul have ended up in *me*?” I demand.

I haven't got a clue. I promise you, this wasn't my idea.

“Well, gods be sure it wasn't mine.”

I stare through the dimness, my stomach still listing uneasily. Am I really going to believe her story?

Wait. There's a simple way to test whether she really is inside my body and not simply watching me.

I back up until my ass brushes a stack of boxes and tuck my hand behind me, still clutching my knife in the other. In the cramped space where no one could possibly see, I press two fingers against my spine. “How many fingers am I holding out?”

The voice in my head snorts derisively, but after a few seconds she must realize I do expect an answer. *Two. Must we really play this game? There are more important—*

My skin has chilled, but it could have been a lucky guess. I adjust my hand to extend all four fingers, including the partial stump of my pointer. “And now?”

Four. Look, I know this sounds ridiculous, but I've been here in your head while you've roved all over the city, so it's rather difficult for me to doubt what's going on. And that I can't do much of anything about it.

Something about those last words sends a deeper jab of ice through my veins. What was it she said earlier—that she wanted to talk because she couldn't ‘get things done’ otherwise?

I've really got a ghost in my head, and she's been there for hours. Hours in which my head hasn't always felt entirely normal.

Those dizzy spells that came out of the blue...

“Did you try to make *me* do things for you?” I have to ask. “To... to take over my mind?”

There's a moment of silence that's almost sheepish. Her voice returns as brashly nonchalant as before. *Who wouldn't have? Here I am, trapped in a body that's not mine and that I don't know, with no way of reaching out to anyone who could help unless it's through you—how could I not try?*

Somehow she makes it sound totally reasonable and not like she attempted to hijack my life.

I grimace, picturing the chestnut-haired girl in her silk dress like she must have been before someone jabbed a knife through her neck. I can practically see her arching her eyebrows and tilting her head with measured coyness.

I force myself to return to my bed, sitting down on the heap of fabric.

Tension stays coiled all through my frame. “Why didn’t you just talk to me?”

You mean since that’s going so well right now? I couldn’t imagine how you’d react. It would have been much simpler if I could have borrowed you for a day or two to get my affairs in order... I promise I’d have returned you in the same state I found you in, or possibly better.

Her tone implies that *better* wouldn’t be too hard. I find myself clenching my jaw again.

“Considering that all I know about *you* is that you managed to get yourself murdered, forgive me for being skeptical.”

Well, I’m talking to you now. You do know I was murdered, so surely you can agree that justice should be done?

“I expect the powers that be will investigate whether I get involved or not. It’s not as if anyone could imagine you tripped and accidentally fell on that knife.”

That’s not the only— She pauses with a sigh of exasperation. I have the sense of her gathering her temper.

When she speaks again, it’s in a smoother, more cloying tone. *We’ve gotten off on the wrong foot. I apologize. I should start by properly introducing myself. I’m Julita Laonek of the county of Nikodi, dedicate to Creaden, in my second year at the Sovereign College.*

She may not realize how much she’s told me with that single sentence. Her last name uses the masculine ending, which means her family styles themselves an impressive one by carrying on an earlier ancestor’s name rather than her using the common form of adapting her mother’s. Yet she’s not even from a major family overseeing an entire province but some county I’ve never heard of.

If she’s dedicated herself to Creaden, most likely she’s planning to either take over the family estate or run her eventual husband’s. Or rather, she was, before the unfortunate incident with the knife.

Compared to me, she’s minor royalty. But to her peers at the college, she’d be little better than a nobody.

Maybe she’s gotten in the habit of laying on the airs thick to distract people from that fact.

And you are? she prods as I take everything in. *I’m sure you don’t actually work for Master Radir.*

The corners of my mouth kick up. “No. I’m Ivy, and I don’t work for anyone except myself.”

Ivy?

I ignore her prompt for more. There isn't anything more to the name I took on for myself after I fled my family's home, and I'll be garroted before I tell her my old one.

It's no longer really mine anyway.

Instead, I let a prick of my own curiosity guide me. "What were you doing wandering around the alleys of Slaughterwell, Julita Laonek?"

I was attempting to investigate the local temples for signs of illicit magic.

Of all the things she could have said, that's definitely not anything I'd have guessed at.

My gut twists into a knot. "What kind of illicit magic? Are you working with the Crown's Watch?"

She couldn't know, or even suspect—?

My unwanted passenger gives a huff. *No, they wouldn't listen. We need more evidence first, which is why I was out looking for it. If any devouts were supporting the conspiracy, it seems most likely they'd need to be from the smaller, out of the way temples to escape notice.*

I pause, knitting my brow. Not anything to do with me, then. But... "What conspiracy? What are you talking about?"

There's much more at stake here than my life. Someone at the college is experimenting with the same sort of magic that brought on the Great Retribution.

"What?" I sputter through a jolt of deeper horror. "But—if the godlen realize—they could punish us all over again. Who would be stupid enough to try?"

People who don't care what happens to anyone else if they can gain a little more power, Julita mutters. People who think they're so smart they'll manage to sneak it past the gods.

"Are you sure? At the royal college—right under the king's nose?"

She takes on an arch tone. *I know what I've seen. They've tried to cover up their rituals, but there've been signs. And they nearly killed the prince the last time the royal family toured the college. That's when I knew I had to do something.*

I rub my temple. "If they're attacking Prince Jacos, why isn't the army doing something about it? What more proof could you need?"

They think he simply got sick. Whoever's in on the conspiracy, they're stealthy about it. What I've observed isn't something I can hand over to the

Watch or the royal guards. It'd only be hearsay.

Despite her haughtiness, an urgent note threads through her voice. She truly believes the threat is real.

And I can't imagine much short of a potential continent-wide catastrophe bringing a noble to the reeking streets of the outer wards.

Still, I have to confirm that I'm understanding her correctly.

My voice comes out hoarse. "So you're saying that there are students at the Sovereign College who are... sacrificing entire *people* to add to their gifts?"

Possibly professors are involved too. I haven't been able to determine how far the conspiracy goes, but based on the effects of their attempts, there have to be more than a few of them. You shouldn't sound so shocked. They killed me, didn't they?

She has a point there. I was too startled to put it together, but now that she says it, it's obvious. Not only why she'd have been out there, but why someone would want her dead, if she's on the verge of uncovering crimes this horrifying.

The only type of sorcerers people revile more than the riven are the so-called "scourge sorcerers" who developed their horrific methods several centuries ago. They found a way to demand gifts from the godlen not just through their own living sacrifices but those of family and supposed friends as well, offering up the bodies of the slaughtered.

They thought they could challenge the gods in power. And the All-Giver punished all of us for their psychotic hubris.

The Great God and the lesser divinities ravaged the continent with flames and earthquakes—and then the All-Giver stormed off on us. But only after shrouding our sea in fog and raising the eastern mountains so none of us could attempt to follow.

My soul arrived in this world broken thanks to the aftereffects of that long-distant retribution. I'm a reminder to all of us that when we take on more magic than mortals are meant to handle, it'll destroy us.

But I'm only a danger to my fellow human beings. Scourge sorcery threatens the gods themselves.

And now some greedy assholes are risking bringing the godlen's wrath down on the entire continent once more.

Maybe I shouldn't be surprised. I steal from greedy assholes who don't give a shit about anyone but themselves every week, don't I?

The pricks dabbling in scourge sorcery think they won't get caught. That they can escape divine punishment.

And they're willing to bring the rest of us down with them if they're wrong.

Another unsettling thought strikes me. "The first prince—seven years ago. The royal family said *his* death was an illness. Could it have actually been part of this conspiracy?"

A very good question, Julita says in an approving tone. I've wondered as much myself, but we haven't found any proof one way or the other.

I rub my tired eyes. "'We'? Do other people know about this?"

Yes! I had friends working with me to expose the sorcerers—fellow students and a professor. That's where you can help. I must have been getting close to the villains, or they wouldn't have attacked me. I was supposed to meet with the others tomorrow to share what we've learned. You can do that for me.

I frown. "I can... go to the meeting? Where do you meet?"

At the college, of course.

A disbelieving sputter jolts out of me. "I can't waltz right into the royal college."

Julita's voice warms. *Oh, I'm sure you could. I saw how skilled you were in that ploy at the bakery. And you appear to be a master at avoiding notice. I can give you everything else you need.*

"Somehow I think it'll be a little more complicated than that. And your friends will know I'm not who they expected to be meeting."

I can smooth things over with them. We'll come up with a story just like you did about Master Radir. It'll be as easy as the way you handled the baker.

I pull up my knees and rest my chin on them, bracing myself amid my spinning thoughts.

The only places I'd want to go into *less* than the Sovereign College are the Temple of the Crown and the royal palace itself. There'll be more guards around than I normally encounter in a year.

Ivy... Julita pauses and then goes on at a softer cadence. *There's something incredible about the fact that my soul has survived, however that happened, so I can continue to speak out against these sadistic rogues. I'm getting a rare chance to deal with unfinished business.*

"Your unfinished business," I have to point out. "Not mine."

I'd imagine it'd affect you too if the scourge sorcerers cause a large enough disaster to bring the gods' wrath down on us all. You and the people in the outer wards you clearly care about. Would you truly risk all of them just to avoid a scheme that'll take no more than an hour or two?

Her words bring a lump of guilt into my stomach.

My friends need to know everything I've been looking into if they're going to take on the conspiracy without me, Julita says. I have no idea how much time we have before there's an even bigger strike against the royal family.

I think of the young prince, only a year past his dedication ceremony, gazing stiffly down from the temple balcony a couple of hours ago. These are the kind of monsters who'd kill children.

And who knows how many others. Would Ewalin and Frida survive another Great Retribution? Would Zuzanna and her son, or the sisters I watched playing in their garden?

All I have to do is play noble for a couple of hours. Walk into the college, chat with a few nobles, walk out again.

Is that so much to ask?

My body automatically tenses against the idea. I don't step in; I don't get directly involved.

But I already am. How could I be *more* involved in this woman's life than hosting her soul alongside mine?

It isn't as if I could create a worse disaster than the retribution of the gods, right?

My gaze lifts to the ceiling of its own accord. A shiver passes over my skin.

How *did* I end up absorbing Julita's soul, exactly? What if the gods have noticed me after all, and this is a strange test they're giving me?

I'm not sure what the right answer would be, but completely ignoring the problem definitely seems like a wrong one.

And hey, once I give this ghost what she wants, maybe her soul will depart for the peaceful beyond and leave me be. Even if she's only ephemeral, I can already tell that she won't be easy to ignore.

When you add it all up, it isn't even much of a decision.

I wet my lips, square my shoulders, and nod. "Fine. Tomorrow I break into the royal college."

FIVE



I don't usually give a roach's ass how I look, as long as I don't look any way that's going to make people notice me. So the urge to catch glimpses of myself in the reflections on the shop windows we pass is strange both because it's unfamiliar... and because of what I see looking back at me.

I can't help eyeing the swooping hairstyle I assembled my reddish-blond waves into with my ghostly passenger's coaching after my dip at the public bathhouse. Or the way the berry juice I turned into makeshift rouge brings out my cheekbones and my lips.

Between all that and the faux-silk dress that's the one noble-ish item in my small wardrobe, I'll be drawing a lot more eyes than I'd normally be comfortable with. I'm not going to kid myself that I'm any great beauty with these knobby arms and the pallor to my skin that looks more sickly than creamy, but I need to pretend I think I'm something special.

Because if I show how ridiculous I feel, this con isn't going to last more than the time it takes me to walk through the college's gate.

People believe what you show them. I've learned that time and time again.

I just have to put on my best noble-esque airs and act like nothing could be more natural than my strolling through the city center toward the Sovereign College.

Julita's voice peals through my head, full of her own self-assurance and more upbeat now that she's gotten her way. *You look fantastic. No one would ever think that just yesterday you were scrambling around in the muck.*

I bite back half a dozen snarky remarks I could make, because talking to one's self while taking a stroll is going to draw an even worse kind of attention. I've tried thinking back at her, but while she's obviously aware of what my body is doing, my unbidden guest can't seem to read my mind even when I want her to.

Maybe I should be grateful for that small mercy.

It would make having a conversation in public a damn sight easier, though.

We'll get there right in time for the meeting, Julita goes on in a bright voice I think is meant to be reassuring. *You've conned people like this before—no need to worry about it.*

I have, which was why I own the dress, but never for more than a few minutes. Just popping into a business or approaching someone on the street to pilfer a bit of information I need or set the stage for a more surreptitious comeuppance.

I'd rather be lurking under the charm merchant's blasted wagon than taking this walk.

At least I won't need to deal with laying the heaviest news on Julita's friends. When we worked out the plan, she insisted that she doesn't want me telling them that she's dead.

Neither of us has any idea exactly who murdered her. She suggested that telling them would only distract them from the bigger picture. Even if her body has been found and her friends have heard about it, she wants me to act as if it's a surprise to me.

I'm going to claim I'm one of Julita's friends, visiting from her hometown. I'll say she was embarking on a more in-depth investigation and suspected she wouldn't make the meeting, so she gave me the means to turn up in her place.

Then I'll recite whatever information the ghost in my head instructs me to and walk away.

The idea of leaving her friends in the dark about just how far the scourge sorcerers have gone still makes me uneasy. But it's not as if I could tell them I'm hosting her soul without sounding mad.

And it does take the pressure off. I won't have to deal with any anger or grief over her loss from these strangers.

Noble strangers, whose grief could overflow with pompous indignation or hysterical panic for all I know.

Almost there! Julita declares with unrestrained eagerness.

A growing tremor of divine energy is seeping over my skin from the Temple of the Crown. As the pale marble building comes into view, I give it a quick glance.

The body of the riven sorcerer hangs where it's been suspended next to the main doorway, a display that typically lasts a day or two until the clerics decide the statement has been made thoroughly enough.

I yank my gaze away from his swollen skin and pick up my pace just a little.

My boots rap against the wide cobblestone road that leads around the grand temple farther up the slope to the walls that surround the college.

The school's builders decided to go for a much more ominous vibe than those who built the temple—or maybe they felt that its inhabitants should be focused on learning rather than pretty architecture. Slabs of dull gray limestone loom before me.

Not that the college is exactly ugly. There's something unnervingly breathtaking about the dark towers that jut up over that wall, dotted with narrow arched windows. And the frame around the broad wood-and-iron door holds an intricate carving: a rearing horse on one side, and a glowering gargoyle on the other.

This is where you need my bracelet, Julita says. *Hold your wrist up so the flat part faces the gargoyle's eyes.*

She didn't admit it when I mentioned the stolen bracelet earlier, but I have the sneaking suspicion that she was responsible for nabbing it. Taking a momentary snatch of control over my body while I reeled with the initial impact of her soul.

It definitely serves her purposes for me to have it, because apparently I can't enter the college without the bangle.

I hold the bracelet to the level of the gargoyle's bulging stone eyes. For the space of a few heartbeats, nothing happens.

A bead of sweat trickles down my back at the thought that Julita might be wrong—whatever magical security this vaunted place possesses can tell I'm not the proper owner of her bracelet.

Then the door creaks open.

The second I step past the threshold into the shadowy space beyond, Julita's presence stirs in my head. *Stop there. Just a second.*

What now?

I definitely can't ask her here. I freeze in place, peering into the darkened space around me.

I expected a short passage into the courtyard around the main college buildings. Instead, I'm in a dim, branching hallway that stretches a short distance ahead and on either side of me with no exit in sight.

Magic courses through the air, raising goosebumps on my arms. It doesn't feel as vast as the power that emanates from the Temple of the Crown, but gods be sure there's a damned lot of it in this small, silent space.

Julita murmurs as if to herself. *What was the cursed password of the week? Lively fleas fly... No. Lively fleas rip from royalty like ribbons.*

As I raise my eyebrows at the vaguely insulting phrase, she chuckles to herself and then explains. *The entrance is a conjured maze to make sure no one actually enters who isn't meant to be here. The password gives the current directions. Head left, then forward, then right, forward, right, left, right.*

I'd have had an easier time striding ahead with confidence if she sounded more certain of the password. Willing my hands to stay loose at my sides, I turn toward the lefthand passage.

A few steps along it, more halls open up at either side of me. I keep going forward, then veer right when the hallway branches again. Forward, right, left, right...

As I take my third step into the final passage, an open doorway glimmers into being in front of me. The air there shimmers with a warble of magic I can hear as well as feel.

Go on through. If you have any harmful gift-magic attached to you, it'll wash you clean.

That's actually a pretty genius security mechanism.

All the same, I have to suppress a shudder at the ripple of sensation that passes through me as I step over the threshold. It feels as if I've been doused by a transparent, glittery waterfall.

Good. Looks like you didn't attract any malice recently. The hard part is done.

Thank all that's holy.

I walk on into the bright late-morning sun—and my pulse hitches with an unexpected smack of recognition.

I've never seen the main college building before—not up close without the walls hiding the lower reaches. Except I have.

The vast stone face with its immense towers blazed into my mind amid the flood of images that hit me when I blanked out over Julita's body.

When her soul slammed into my brain.

I was catching glimpses of her memories, apparently.

The same effect hasn't happened since, but the thought still unnerves me. I wet my lips and propel myself forward despite my uneasiness.

A cobblestone path leads to the castle-like building's main entrance, with fields sprawling all around it within the college's high walls. Not far away, a group of students are exchanging practice blows with swords.

In the other direction, I spot a few women on horseback, trotting around the side of the building. Of course the college would have its own stables as well.

I suck in a deep breath, taking in the scent of trampled grass and seeking the whiff of sweet hay and horsey musk that's one of the few things I miss from my family's home.

Straight ahead, right into the building, Julita says. That's the Quadring ahead of you, where they hold the classes for the four divisions. Leadership, companionship—

"Scholarship and martial service," I can't stop myself from murmuring. "I've heard."

Julita pauses for a moment as if taken aback. *Well. Even better that you're prepared. We'll go through the entrance ahead of you, right down the main hall, along the walkway, and into the Domi.*

Walking on, I cock my head just slightly. Hoping she'll catch the implicit question in the movement.

Julita picks up on my intention, although maybe it's not surprising that she's become attuned to me when she's been living inside my head for the better part of a day. *There's a smaller courtyard in the middle of the Quadring, and in the middle of that is a building that's officially called the Domicile. But we usually just say "the Domi." That's where you find all the dorms, the dining hall, the ballroom... and the library, which is our destination.*

A couple of guards in the sapphire blue uniforms of royal service stand off to the side of the entrance she indicated. Their gazes slide over the passing students with apparent indifference, but my skin tightens when the one man's head turns toward me.

A spurt of magic flares in my chest with a sudden appeal.

It could conceal me so much better than a counterfeit dress. It could make sure not one person here even—

I tamp down the urge with a subtle clench of my hands. No fucking way.

There's no urgent threat, but my power slaps me with a fit of resentment all the same. My lungs burn as if I've inhaled a puff of acid smoke.

I grit my teeth and keep walking.

Julita's tone turns puzzled. *Are you all right?*

I give a slight nod and inhale slowly. The prickles of pain fade away.

I march through the Quadring's entrance into an airy, high-ceilinged room that several full houses from the fringes could fit inside—which appears to serve no purpose other than as a gathering place for clusters of students and to split off into narrowing internal halls. At the far end, I find myself on a cobblestone path surrounded by gardens on either side and a glass ceiling overhead.

Julita said the inner courtyard was “smaller,” but it's hardly *small*. It's still a good half a minute's walk to the mountainous building in the middle.

Through the glass covering that must provide shelter for students traveling between the inner and outer buildings during bad weather, I peer up at the Domicile. Its name seems appropriate not just for its function as the students' home but also for the domed roof arching five stories above my head.

Narrow silver spires jut at intervals along the edge of that roof. I can only count four of them from this vantage point, but I'd be willing to bet there are ten in total. Nine for the godlen and one for the Great God who made them.

The All-Giver might have abandoned us centuries ago, but no one in the realm misses a chance to honor the One and the nine who followed. Especially if they have plenty of money to throw around.

The covered walkway leads straight to a set of double doors in the Domi. Before I've quite reached them, they swing open to grant me entrance.

Because apparently nobles are too lazy to grasp a door handle? Who wasted their energy compelling their magic to serve this purpose?

Gods smite me, I can already feel the grease of privilege seeping into my skin.

The entry hall of the Domi isn't half as grand as the first one I came through, which gives my nerves a chance to settle a little. As I amble past a few wandering students who barely spare me a glance, Julita speaks up again.

Take the second hall on the left. We're going past the main door to the

library and around the bend. Stop just after the tapestry of Signy.

I keep my chin high and my strides steady. As I pass the library door, a couple of women standing just outside it titter to each other, but there's no reason to think their giggles have anything to do with me.

No reason to think they don't either, but what should their judgment matter to me?

The hall narrows around the bend. Several faded tapestries hang over the gray stone, bringing muted color to the space.

There's a courtly image of some past queen I don't recognize. A scene of Creaden placing a crown on the supposed first king of the entire world.

And then Signy, the greatest hero of the last century. I've seen—and read—so many depictions of her that I can identify her from the very first glimpse.

Like usual, the weaver has set her on a small hill. Her black hair unfurls behind her golden face, and a glow nearly as bright as what artists reserve for the gods shines around her. She's wearing an odd combination of flowing dress and battle armor, her sword pointing toward the massive army of the Darium empire below her.

Only three figures stand around her, just beneath the crest of the hill: the three men she took as lovers and then husbands. With the godden of love giving her blessing, no one dared to argue about the legalities.

When you free your country from centuries under an imperial dictatorship, people cut you a little slack.

It wasn't even *our* country Signy freed, but every realm on the western side of the continent celebrates her. She showed the way for the rest of us to shake off those shackles too.

I'd bet the countries on the eastern side celebrate her as well—quietly, where the current emperor and his lackeys won't overhear them. They must hope that one day they'll wrench free of his grasp too.

By the far edge of the tapestry, I pause. No one else is wandering through this end of the hallway.

The sconce just next to you, Julita says. Tap the base two times on the left, once on the right, then give it a tug.

All right then. I set my fingers against the bronze fixture with its magical glow as she said.

At the ending tug, a narrow shadow spills down the wall in front of me. A shadow shaped as if it's falling away into a tight, dark passage—a conjured

secret entrance someone permanently fixed to this spot.

“So very sneaky,” I murmur under my breath as I step into the passage. Darkness closes behind me.

We’re dealing with people willing to kill to gain power, who’re practicing right here in the college. We can hardly afford to be careless. Even being careful...

Julita pauses, with a hint of tightly held emotion. She’s kept up a pretty blasé attitude about the whole murder thing, but the woman did just *die* yesterday.

I can’t imagine the shock and horror she’s going through, that she’s keeping to herself rather than venting all over me. She didn’t want to be stuck in this situation any more than I did.

Maybe I should give her a little more benefit of the doubt.

The passage quickly descends into a series of steps. I can’t see them, only feeling my way with one foot in front of the other and my hand against the cool stone of the wall.

Alek found this passage, Julita continues after a moment. It leads down to one of the smaller rooms in the archives. They have a normal entrance too, inside the library, of course, but that’s more noticeable. Gods know what the scholars used to get up to down here that they felt the need to make a secret entrance.

My lips twitch with the start of a smile, even as I file away the name. Alek—one of the friends who’s helping uncover the scourge sorcerer conspiracy, presumably.

I’m opening my mouth, about to ask for the others’ names, when I take one more step and find myself emerging from the darkness in between two bookcases in a hazy, low-ceilinged room.

The figures already standing around the desk in the middle of that room look up, and my mouth freezes before any sound can come out.

There are four of them. Four men, all different in looks but striking in their own ways.

The massive one with the blood-red hair.

The one with the warm smile and the short, tawny waves.

The one with the polished leather mask hiding more than half of his bronze-brown face.

And the one whose skin looks as sun-kissed as his ruffled locks, although the smirk I remember is faltering at the sight of me.

The same four from the image that swam up in my mind while I pressed my hands to Julita's bleeding neck—

Not just an image. A memory. Her memory of meeting with them here, before.

I should have realized after I recognized the college building.

I shouldn't be standing here gaping like an idiot.

But before I can work a single word from my throat, the man with the dark red hair takes a step toward me, the brawn flexing across his broad shoulders beneath his gilded tunic.

His baritone reverberates through the room, smooth and cool but with a tang of menace. "And who the fuck are you?"

SIX



You don't survive for eight years on the streets without a swift set of wits. The second the massive man's question rings through the air, my mind snaps out of shock and locks on to my story.

I take a small step forward, confident but not imposing, ignoring the stutter of my pulse. I shift my usual wording into the formal phrasing typical of the upper class. "I'm a friend of Julita's. She asked me to attend this meeting in her place."

The man cocks his head to the side with a subtle twitch of his head. It's difficult to look away from his stunningly chiseled features.

He crosses his muscular arms over his equally muscular chest in a pose that sends a different twinge of familiarity through me. As if I've seen this man somewhere other than in that flash of Julita's memories.

"Interesting," he says in a drawl too cool to be totally casual. "And where would Julita be?"

In my head, adding to the conversation with an amused lilt to her voice.

Don't mind him. Stavros has to indulge his bossing-people-around inclinations somewhere now that he's not commanding entire armies anymore.

Her tone is dismissive, but my entire body stiffens. Stavros? Armies?

My gaze flicks over the looming man again and snags on one of his hands, tucked under his elbow. The hand that's a little too stiff, a little too even in color to be actual flesh, as well as it matches his light brown skin.

With a sickening lurch of my gut, I realize why I recognize his stance.

I'm looking at General Stavros, military genius and leader of a quarter of

the Crown's soldiers... or at least, he was until an injury in battle last year knocked him from his pedestal.

Other than the prosthetic hand, which he's needed since his sacrifice to the warrior godlen, Sabrelle, at his twelfth-year dedication, he appears hale and hearty enough. I had no idea he was slumming it with college students.

But that's not what turns my blood to ice. No, the real problem is that the one time I saw him before, two years ago—in a helm that hid his distinctive blood-red hair and with a much *more* distinctive metal prosthetic—he was presiding over the execution of the last riven sorcerer to be brought to justice before last night.

A riven sorcerer he personally hunted down and dragged to the capital.

When I blink, an image flickers behind my eyes: his tightly satisfied smile as the drugged woman jerked in the noose.

Great God filet and fry me, I might as well have draped myself on a chopping block by coming here.

The former general looks younger than I'd have imagined, late twenties at most, but that's hardly a comfort. My fingers have curled toward my palms, my left hand itching to snatch up the knife hidden in my boot.

Of course, I've got nowhere to run to, and *stabbing* the former General Stavros is only going to land me in deeper shit than I've already stumbled into.

My magic prickles through my ribs, but I resist its demanding pinches. There's no immediate danger because he doesn't know what I am—but he sure as shit will if I start throwing my power around.

There's nothing to do but continue the ruse until I can walk away. And fast, because all four of the men are looking sterner with every passing second of my silence.

"She couldn't make it," I spit out hastily, and manage to gather myself enough to even out my voice.

The plan, the explanation we worked out, it's there in my head along with the woman's blasted ghost.

"We met for dinner last night," I go on. "We know each other from back home—from Nikodi—I'm in Florian visiting my uncle. She told me about your investigation, and that there was an urgent lead she intended to follow that would take her out of the city for a day or two, but she didn't want you to worry. So she explained how to find the meeting and asked me to come in her place."

By the desk, the masked man shifts his weight. He's tall but much slimmer than Stavros, his lean frame covered in a moss-green tunic and brown trousers that are less flashy than the former general's clothes but still clearly well-made.

Like the rest of the other men, I'd guess he's around my age—a student, then—although with him it's difficult to tell.

His gaze pierces into me through the holes in the deep brown leather of his mask. The material covers one side of his face from beneath the black waves of his hair along his forehead down to his jaw, but angles up around his mouth and across his nose so that only the area around his eye and forehead is concealed on the other side.

I'm not sure what to make of it. I've never seen anyone from any level of society make a sacrifice that would only affect the surface of their face and not its features.

Those who prefer not to offer more than skin tend toward arm and leg areas and leave the mark on display. Those who want a more significant sacrifice might give an ear or an eye.

Maybe he's suffered some kind of injury too, though I doubt it was in battle.

Even with that much of his features disguised, it's obvious from the tapered slope of his jaw and nose, the fullness of his lips and the brightness of his eyes, that he's plenty handsome himself. Julita apparently prefers her allies to be appealing to the eye as well as stealthy.

The masked man's lips purse tight in the moment before they part. His voice comes out cold and flat. "You're not a student here. How did you even get into the college?"

I force a smile that I hope looks at least mildly reassuring. "She told me the week's passcode and the way to open the secret passage to this room. And she lent me this."

I hold up my arm. Julita's bracelet gleams around my wrist.

The blond man props himself against the side of the desk, a hint of his smirk coming back to his equally fine face. While not as huge as Stavros, he's obviously well-built—and knows it, from the way he carries himself.

He's turned his formal shirt provocatively casual by leaving it unbuttoned halfway down his chest—revealing the golden sigil branded over his sternum. He's dedicated to Kosmel.

The overseer of luck and trickery is an unusual choice for a noble.

And he's missing the lobes of his ears. Both of them, cut off in a smooth diagonal line from what must have been a dedication sacrifice.

He's got some kind of gift, though probably not a very large one given the minor offering.

"How do we know you didn't just steal the bracelet from her?" he asks breezily, as if he wouldn't care much even if I had.

Oh, Benny. I can practically hear Julita rolling her eyes. Remind him that I outranked him at the Blue Hart pub the first night we met.

I arch one eyebrow, channeling my noble passenger's attitude for all I'm worth. "Could I have also stolen the story of how she drank you under the table at the Blue Hart when the two of you met?"

The blond man barks a laugh and claps his hands together. "I like this one. I say we keep her too."

Julita snorts. *As if it wasn't me who herded the bunch of them together in the first place.*

Stavros shoots the other man an unimpressed look. The underlying coolness of his voice sends a shiver down my spine despite his languid tone. "Keep your pants on, Benedikt. She hasn't even told us her name."

"Ivy," I say promptly. "Ivy Euridya of Nikodi." Julita assured me that none of her friends were familiar enough with her birthplace to have any idea of what other semi-prominent families live there.

"Ivy," Stavros repeats, in a tone that suggests it's the most ridiculous name he's ever heard. Is there really no chance I can get away with stabbing him?

The tawny-haired man who's said nothing so far comes around the side of the desk by Stavros. Every movement of his sleek body emanates a feline sort of grace that speaks of both strength and poise. But the soft smile he aims at me is the warmest gesture anyone here has offered so far.

The other men may all be striking, but this one is so gorgeous my breath catches despite my wariness.

A trace of magic tingles through me. Did he work a gift on me?

He turns his dark green eyes toward the military man. "I think we should listen to her. Julita wouldn't have sent her if it wasn't important."

As he talks, I catch the glint of red and blue in the back of his mouth. I have to restrain my reaction before both my eyebrows shoot up.

He's replaced at least a few of his molars with gemstone substitutes. Rubies and sapphires from the look of them.

Teeth aren't an unusual dedication sacrifice, though I've heard they're one of the more painful options, especially if you offer more than one. But usually only courtesans fill in the gaps with such eye-catching replacements, devoted as they are to beauty along with every other pleasure of the flesh.

It's common enough that I've heard pliers of the carnal trade referred to sneeringly as "gaudy teeth" rather than their actual job title.

This is quite the motley group Julita assembled.

Of course Casimir would believe you first, she says with apparent amusement. *Sweet Cas, always ready to serve.*

Even though I've only just met the man, her patronizing tone raises my hackles.

Didn't she say these men were her "friends"? She doesn't sound as if she thinks all that highly of any of them.

Since I've now gotten three of their names, I have to assume the one in the mask is the Alek she mentioned who found the secret passage.

The slim man's mouth has tightened again into a grimace, but he sets his hands on the desk with a determined air. "Fine. What did she ask you to tell us? What's this mission she's gone on?"

Benedikt nods with a swish of his sleek golden hair. "And why didn't she let us in on the fun?"

He asks the question like a joke, but a faint crease has bitten into his brow. He's at least a little concerned about her.

Which doesn't seem to matter much to Julita, based on her dry tone. *It is nice to be missed.*

Well, I'm not here to worry about the feelings of these strangers, one of whom would haul me straight to the gallows if he found out about the magic lurking inside me.

I drag in a breath, taking a moment now that I've accounted for all four of the men to study the rest of my surroundings. The small room is packed with shelving units around the broad desk, the shelves stacked with books and boxes, many of them dusty.

I guess no one much uses this room other than Julita and her coalition of conspiracy-hunters.

Yanking my attention back to the men, I rattle off the facts my ghostly guest wanted me to convey. "She saw reason to believe that the scourge sorcerers might be getting some assistance from or have associated with the Temple of Still Waters in Slaughterwell." The reason mainly being that she

was murdered on her way to check out the place. “She thinks you should use your connections to look into it further.”

Julita gives me a mental nudge. *And the knife. Tell them about the knife.*

I was getting to that. “And she saw someone she’s certain is part of the conspiracy, but they had their face concealed. The only item she made out in any detail was a knife they were carrying.”

Pausing, I bring up the uncomfortable memory of Julita’s gasping, gushing body right before she died.

I’ve handled a lot of blades in my life. Even though I was focused on attempting to save her life at the time, I automatically noted some of the details.

“It was about eight inches long—two thirds of that blade, the other third handle. A fairly simple handle, metal with a spiral engraving on the pommel and black leather wrapped around the grip. Slightly curved cross guard. Blade about an inch wide, double-edged.”

By the time I’ve finished that recitation, Stavros’s glower is searing into me. I resist the urge to glare right back at him.

So I have a bit of a thing for knives. What about it?

“That doesn’t sound very distinctive,” Alek says doubtfully.

I spread my hands. “That’s all she could tell me. Keep an eye out for it, I suppose.”

Of course, who knows if the murderer has another blade that looks the same? It hadn’t looked like he was coming back for the first. But Julita wanted to give them all the evidence we can.

Stavros clears his throat. “You haven’t explained what she’s up to now.”

He shifts on his feet, just a slight sign of restlessness but enough for me to note it. Even Casimir is watching me with an intensity I can sense is unusual for him, waiting for my answer.

These men are awfully invested in my unwanted passenger. Just how “friendly” has she gotten with them?

She’s got decent taste in looks. I could do without the interest in riven-slaughtering, though.

I meet the former general’s gaze steadily. “She didn’t tell me anything specific about that. She simply said that if she didn’t leave right away, she was worried she’d miss her chance, but she didn’t want to leave you wondering. It sounded as though there wasn’t time for her to send word back to you even if she’d wanted company.”

A frown mars Casimir's dazzling face. Stavros rubs his square jaw but can't seem to find anything to criticize about my statement.

Nicely done, Julita says. You got all the important parts in.

I'd like to think that means I can go now, but Benedikt adjusts his jaunty position on the edge of the desk to glance at the others. "Well, my forays into spydom haven't gotten me very far in the past couple of days. No remarks on any unusual indications of magic in the palace."

I focus on him for a beat longer than I did before. Who is he that he'd have a direct line to what's being said in the royal household?

His archly handsome face offers no clues.

If he's a student here, he can't be acting as a courtier yet, but maybe someone else in his family is. Nobles were the ones who invented nepotism, after all.

Stavros runs his fingers through his hair, looking abruptly bored with the conversation. "I confirmed that there's no official record of dartling eggshell being purchased by any students or staff within the city. If Julita was right about that dust she says she saw."

"Julita knew what she was talking about," Alek says with just a hint of heat creeping into his flat tone.

Casimir nods. "Jules did always say they'd have bought it on the black market or through a secondary source. That was why she was looking into the temples."

Stavros glances at the masked man. "Have you found out anything more about the other substances she mentioned, Aleksis?"

"A few things. There—"

Alek pauses, his piercing gaze coming to rest on me again. "We should let Ivy take her leave, shouldn't we? She must have better things to do than listen to us."

He doesn't sound considerate so much as wary. He doesn't *want* me listening in on their discussions.

Well, that's just fine. I did what I came for.

The sooner I'm beyond the college's gloomy gray walls, the better.

"Indeed." Stavros offers me a cocky grin. "We wouldn't want to bore you."

Julita lets out a huff. *I'd have liked to know more about their progress, but I suppose it'll look suspicious if you try to stay. Well— Oh! Ask them if Wendos has been up to anything—ask them if any of them saw him yesterday*

evening.

Her voice turns abruptly urgent with the last demand. I have no idea who Wendos is, but I can't see any point in denying her.

I give a slight cough as if clearing my throat. "I don't want to interfere with your discussions. There's only one thing I almost forgot. Julita also wanted to know if any of you saw Wendos yesterday evening. Or any other time recently, doing anything that made you suspicious."

From the look the men exchange, I get a distinctly dubious vibe from all of them. Whoever this Wendos guy is, maybe Julita's been harping on about him a little too much for her allies' patience.

Benedikt pipes up. "He was in the card room for a few hours after dinner. I didn't have the pleasure of relieving him of any of his money, but plenty of others did."

Julita lets out a disgruntled sound. *Not him then. This is getting us nowhere.*

I bob into the faintest sketch of a curtsy. "That's everything, then. I'm glad I could do the favor for Julita."

Casimir strolls over with another of those smiles that warms me up like sweet tea on a winter day.

A smile he'd never have offered if he knew who I really am.

That thought douses the warmth with an uneasy chill, but the courtesan shows no sign of noticing my discomfort. "Thank you for taking the risk of coming here at all, Ivy. I'll show you the way out."

He tweaks a few volumes on the bookcase next to the bit of wall I emerged from. The shadowy pathway reforms on the wall.

I raise my hand to the men in an awkward farewell that seems necessary and set off. As the darkness closes behind me, I exhale in a rush of relief.

There, that's over with.

All right, Julita says briskly, giving the sense of rubbing her hands together. *Let's get down to some real work.*

SEVEN



I jerk to a halt the second I've stepped into the Domi's hall next to the tapestry of Signy. Did I hear my uninvited guest right?

"Down to work?" I mutter. "I did what you asked me to do already."

Julita dismisses my hesitation in what I'm learning is her usual coyly self-assured way. *I simply want to check my dorm. It's possible my murderer broke in to go through my things after cutting me down. If he left any evidence, we can pass that on to the others too.*

"That wasn't the deal."

We're already here. The hard part is over. It'll only take a few more minutes.

When I still balk, Julita sighs. *Ivy, I lost my entire life yesterday, to villains who are hoping to destroy a lot more lives if they get away with it. This is my last chance to do everything in my power to ensure they're brought to justice. You've been fantastic so far. I know you won't get into any trouble.*

I run my thumb over the missing stub on my right pointer finger. Every inch of my skin is already itching with the urge to sprint out of this place as fast as I can, to trade the clinging faux-silk dress for my hooded tunic, to duck back into the shadows where I belong.

But I can see her point. And I *am* already inside, past the security measures. No one's badgered me about my presence so far.

What kind of a monster would I be if I ignore her plea?

And just how insane will I go if I have to listen to her complaining about my refusal for however long it takes until I figure out how to *uninvite* her

from my head?

I exhale sharply. “Fine. But we do need to be quick about it. Where’s your dorm?”

Julita’s voice brightens with so much relief I feel a jab of guilt over hesitating. *One floor up. If you head around the next corner in the hall, there’s a smaller staircase down there that isn’t used very often.*

I don’t run into any of Julita’s schoolmates in the narrowing hall or the even narrower spiral of the staircase. When I step out onto the second floor, a bunch of male students are just ambling through one of the nearby doorways.

One of them looks me up and down with a leering curl of his lips that has my fingers twitching toward my hip where I’d usually have my favorite knife stashed.

Since stabbing him wouldn’t be any better for my whole incognito mission than sticking it to Stavros would have, I settle for pretending I haven’t even noticed him. Or the chuckles that follow in my wake as Julita nudges me in the opposite direction.

Are they laughing because he made some crude comment about me, or because they can tell I don’t quite fit the mold?

A lot of pricks in this place, Julita remarks in a darkly wry tone as I follow the bend in the hall. *It makes figuring out who’s just an ass and who’s actually evil rather difficult.*

I have to restrain a snort of unexpected amusement.

For a couple of minutes, I walk on past rows of doors spaced several paces apart. Each wooden surface holds an intricate etching of some scene from history: Silana’s, the continent’s, or that of the gods themselves.

As I stride past them, Julita fills me in on the details of our destination. *This half of the second floor belongs to the leadership division. We room in clusters. Everyone gets a private bedroom, of course, but they’re in clumps of ten around a common leisure room. Room assignments switch up once per term. They want us to have a chance to interact with everyone in our division.*

Wonderful—so there are nine potential witnesses to *me* breaking into Julita’s dorm.

I allow myself a grimace and drop my voice to the barest whisper so no one beyond those doors can hear me. “And how do I get in?”

The bracelet is the key there too. All students and staff have an ornament attuned for the access they need—that’s mine. I’ll tell you what to do once we get there. If anyone’s around, you can tell them I sent you to pick something

up while I was busy with a project out of town. We're almost there...

She has me stop outside a door carved with an image of a stately woman who I guess from her crown is King Konram's late grandmother. The artist has given her the same prominent nose. Creaden's sigil slashes through the wood above her head.

Press my bracelet to the ring on her right hand, Julita says.

I tip my wrist, and a rasp sounds from inside the door. When I test the knob, it opens.

I slip into the common room cautiously. A gust of mingled perfumes assaults my nose.

Elegant upholstered chairs and settees fill most of the space, along with a card table in the corner and a built-in bookcase next to it. Heavy velvet curtains drape the sides of the broad picture window at the far end of the room.

No one's using the space at the moment, thank the gods. My gaze darts over the relatively plain doors to the individual bedrooms along the side walls.

Left side, third one down. Let's see if it's still locked.

That knob jars when I test it.

Julita lets out a satisfied hum. *Feel the notches on the backside of the knob? Press the bottom one twice, then the right one once, then the top, then the bottom again.*

When I've followed the pattern, I'm rewarded with another click. I ease the door open.

Julita's bedroom looks about as jumbled as my mind feels with her bustling around in it. Silk and satin dresses sprawl across every available surface, including the polished wooden floor with its flower-print rug. By contrast, the wardrobe standing with its door ajar across from the four-poster bed appears to be all but empty.

"Is this—?" I start to ask, tensing up at the thought of someone having ransacked the place.

Julita lets out a giggle that sounds just slightly sheepish. *I wasn't expecting visitors. I always say it's easier to find what I'm looking for when everything's on display.*

Ah, so this is her mess, not some intruder's. I'm not sure if that makes me feel better or worse.

Although considering that my own bedroom of sorts is mostly

disorganized heaps of books, maybe I'm not in a position to judge.

"Is anything out that shouldn't be?" I ask. "Or anything missing that should be here?"

Take a walk around and let me check everything.

I meander through the chamber, hopping over crumpled dresses here and there. Julita has me open her wardrobe all the way, lift the lid of her well-stocked jewelry box, tug back the soft sheets on the bed, and delve into the drawers on the bedside tables.

When I've investigated every nook and cranny, she makes a disgruntled sound. *I don't see any sign that anyone's been in here. Surely they'd have wanted to search to see what proof I'd already found?*

"Maybe they're afraid they won't be able to sneak in without getting caught," I point out. "They did wait to attack you until you were well away from the college."

True... It was strange. There must have been magic involved. It happened so fast it's a blur. I was walking along, and this blast of wind smacked into me, and then that horrible pain lanced through my neck... If I'd managed to turn around in time, maybe I could have seen them, and we wouldn't need to be digging through my laundry.

I frown. "Someone who can manipulate wind. They used it to distract you? There can't be too many people here with that specific gift."

I don't know of anyone. It could have been merely a coincidence that the wind picked up at the same time. She hisses as if through her teeth. *I should have mentioned that to the men so they could at least look into it. This whole situation is so... disorienting.*

"We could go back to the meeting?" I suggest, as much as my body tenses at the idea.

No, they'll have gone their separate ways by now. Maybe—

"Julita, is that you?"

The tart feminine voice carries through the door, and my stance goes outright rigid with a skip of my pulse. I hadn't realized anyone had come into the common room, but one of Julita's dormmates must have noticed my voice.

There's a sharp rap on the door.

Go on, Julita says. If you pretend you're not here, it'll be so much more awkward when we need to leave.

I square my shoulders and dart over to the door. "Just a moment!"

As I twist the knob, I push my mouth into an ingratiating smile and yank.

A woman tall and sleek as a sapling stands just outside, her flaxen hair piled in an elaborate whorl on top of her head and her wide-set eyes narrowing at the sight of me.

I bring out my most chipper tone before she can speak. “Not Julita. Only a friend picking up something she needed. She’s handling a project out of town. She lent me her bracelet so I could get in.”

I hold up my wrist to reveal it.

The woman’s lips curl with a hint of a sneer. She rotates the partly eaten apple she’s holding between her fingers. “Out of town? Where’s she slunk off to?”

I keep my smile in place despite the hostility in the words. “Oh, I’m not totally sure. I’m supposed to send it on to her near our hometown. As soon as possible, so I’d better get going.”

If this woman hears about Julita’s death and wonders about my odd visit, I expect to be well away from anywhere anyone would be looking for a noble visitor by then.

As I step out and shut the bedroom door behind me, the woman takes another bite of her apple and peers down her nose at me. “Fine. When you see her, tell her I expect the jewelry she borrowed to be returned the very first second she sets foot back at the college.”

In my head, Julita guffaws. *Is she still fussing about those awful earrings? The wretched things nearly pulled my earlobes off. I left them on the side table outside her bedroom—not my fault if someone else snatched them.*

This is a squabble I’m not interested in getting in the middle of. I edge to the side, away from the door. “I’ll mention it to her.”

Julita’s dormmate makes a scoffing sound. “You be careful with her. I’m sure she’s calling you a friend while she can use you, but that’s all she does. Use, use, use. Likes to get everyone she can twisted around her little finger.”

She seems awfully worked up over a pair of earrings. Were they fitted with godlen-blessed 5-carat diamonds or something?

Julita seems to shake herself as if shedding the venom. *The things people will say that they’d never dare speak to your face. If anyone’s a snake in the grass...*

“I’ll keep that in mind too,” I say, raising my hands in a peace-making gesture.

The woman clicks her tongue. “I’m simply saying, she’ll lull you into thinking she’s being nothing but helpful. But underneath she’s always only looking out for her own selfishness.”

Another woman I hadn’t noticed stands up from the chair she was curled up in by the far corner of the room. “Anya, simmer down. It’s not Julita’s fault if people find her charming.”

Both my gaze and that of the woman confronting me snap to the interrupter.

It’s not surprising I didn’t notice her when I had a much more imposing figure in front of me. This girl is slight and modestly dressed as nobles go—which means her dove-gray gown appears to only have three layers instead of five and only a little embroidery on the silky edges. Her fawn-brown hair sits in a simple loose ponytail.

She does have one striking feature, though. She gazes back at us calmly with a single pale green eye, a mauve silk patch with gold-gilded edging covering the other.

She gave up a whole eye in her dedication ceremony for whatever gift she asked to be blessed with. I hope the godlen she devoted herself to gave her a good one.

Anya sniffs and lifts her apple to her lips again. “I don’t see how it’s any of your business, Esmæ. It’s not as if you had much to do with Julita to even know.”

The single-eyed woman—Esmæ—lifts her shoulders in a subtle shrug. “I know it’s hardly good form to lay into someone who isn’t around to defend themselves.”

Julita’s presence in my head stirs with apparent interest. *Never would have thought simpering Esmæ would leap in on my behalf. I suppose she’s spent all this time shyly admiring me from afar.*

Anya rolls her eyes and bites into the apple. With a sputter of disgust, she rears back her head and fishes for a handkerchief to spit out her mouthful. Then she glares at the fruit. “Wretched daimon. Rotting the thing while it’s in my damned hand.”

A roaming daimon spoiled the apple in the last minute?

My forehead furrows, but I’m close enough to see how the previously white flesh is now mottled brown and black.

Esmæ treads over, wrinkling her nose as she takes in the apple. She catches my gaze. “The college’s spirits have been overly restless—and

cantankerous—lately. Although perhaps this one merely liked the poetic justice of souring what’s held by the sour.” She shoots Anya a pointed glance.

Grumbling under her breath, Anya tosses the ruined apple in the waste basket and stalks into her bedroom. My stomach turns, both at the thought of taking a bite of that rotted fruit and the implications of it rotting at all.

Daimon are as likely to ripen fruit as rot it. It all depends on the mood that strikes them. But I’ve never heard of them interfering with food a person’s already eating.

I’d only expect that if they were particularly riled up about something. Something like...

Julita fills in the uneasy suspicion for me. *They’ve been more agitated than usual for a few months now. Since not long before the prince was poisoned. I think they sense the blood that’s being spilled for dark purposes on these grounds—and they’re not happy about it.*

When she first told me about the conspiracy, she said she knew there were more than a few nobles involved “based on the effects.” I think I’m seeing what effects she meant.

As my stomach roils on, Esmae shoots me a sympathetic smile. “Sorry about Anya. She isn’t shy with her opinions.”

It’s hard not to wonder if there might have been a little truth to those opinions, though. After all, Julita does seem to be unnervingly good at cajoling *me* into doing what she wants.

I manage a quick smile in return. “Thank you for stepping in. I should really be on my way.”

And if my ghostly passenger thinks I’m making any more stops during this tour around the royal college, she can eat straw.

I hustle out of the dorm before anyone else can drop in. Julita remains mercifully silent.

Until we come around the next bend and she lets out a sharp hiss followed by a barked command. *Stop there. Back up so he won’t notice you.*

A young man with shaggy coffee-brown hair and coppery skin is just shutting one of the other dorm-room doors behind him, his back to us. Julita’s command is urgent enough that I jerk back around the corner, bracing myself by the pale plaster wall while I peer at him.

That’s Wendos, Julita says in an ominous tone. I wonder how much he knows about the knife that ended up in my throat.

EIGHT



Peeking around the bend in the hall at the stocky guy who set off Julita's concern, I raise an eyebrow in question.

Benedikt said Wendos was playing cards when she was murdered. Why does she still assume he could be involved?

Trust me, she says. Whether he's directly responsible or not, he's no shining soul.

I have to take her word for it. Nothing about the man I'm watching provokes my own defensive instincts.

He raises his hand in greeting to another guy coming out farther down the hall and calls out an easy-going challenge. "I'll see you on the archery range later. You'd better be prepared!"

Then he ambles off in the direction I was headed, toward the main staircase. No sign of subterfuge or a guilty conscience.

"Nothing about him looks particularly murderer-y to me," I say under my breath.

Julita simply hums in answer. When Wendos has disappeared from view, she gives me a mental nudge. *We might as well get going, then.*

We don't catch up with Wendos, wherever Julita's villain has gone within the school, but as I step out of the Domi, my gaze catches on a now unnervingly familiar head of dark red hair.

The former General Stavros is poised about thirty feet away across the sprawling field between the Domi and the square outer building of the Quadring. He's exchanged his hand-like prosthetic for one more like what I saw the night he led the riven sorcerer's execution two years ago: a broad,

boxy loop of metal bent into a hook-like curve. It gleams in the sunlight as he raises it.

Some twenty students are standing around him, watching with rapt attention. One is just stepping forward.

Stavros says something brief, the boy nods, and then the former general lunges faster than I would have thought his massive frame would be capable of.

He snags his prosthetic hook around the guy's upper arm, yanks him in, and lets his other fist fly. It stops at a mere tap of the guy's nose. Then he whips his hook up to show how he could slam one of the boxy corners straight into the guy's temple.

A shiver creeps over my skin. That is not a man I'd want to make an enemy of.

But he already is my enemy simply by virtue of the power I never asked for, which is twisting in my chest at the sight of him.

The king assigned Stav to teach combat and strategy here after he couldn't keep up on the battlefield anymore, Julita says. Everyone in the military division vies to get into his classes.

I'll bet.

Stavros eases back from his student with a coolly cocky smile, and the guy whose skull he could have split open laughs as he adjusts his stance. The other students gathered around are grinning, their expressions avid.

I slow as I take in the class, remembering that Julita wanted to tell her allies about the wind-controlling powers her attacker might have wielded. But Stavros glances across the field then, and his gaze slides right over me as if I'm not there.

Julita prods me. *You can't talk to him here. We keep our meetings secret so no one knows we're associating at all. If it wasn't for that, whoever cut me down would be after the guys next.*

A reasonable precaution. Better not to let murderous conspirators know you're on to them until you can actually cut *them* down.

Walking out of the college is much simpler than walking in. I stride down the grand entrance hall and through the gate with no sign of the maze I had to navigate on the way in or any irritating tickles of magic.

On the street outside, I hurry away from the trio of royal buildings. The tightness in my chest doesn't quite release until the Temple of the Crown is hidden by the looming stone buildings of the main downtown thoroughfare.

I veer down the smaller laneways, instinctively making for my home base. It's too early to sneak into my attic room over the cloth factory, but I've stashed a more discreet change of clothes in one of the bathhouse cubbies.

It definitely won't do me any good roaming around the fringes of the city in this faux-noble get-up.

And then what? As much as Julita is an unwelcome intruder in my head, it feels bizarrely rude to ask her when she plans to take off.

I'm not even sure she knows how to get out of my head... and if she does, would that mean she'd immediately complete her death and pass on into the embrace of her chosen godden?

I'd basically be asking her to kill herself. Other than the part where technically she's already dead.

It also technically isn't my problem, but that fact doesn't diminish the uneasy twinge in my gut. So instead, once I'm weaving through less crowded streets, I bring up a different topic that's been niggling at me.

"Why are you so suspicious of Wendos? What did he do that made you think he's part of the conspiracy?"

The men she's gathered to help her investigate seemed skeptical, so obviously Julita's wariness was based on something they haven't seen or don't believe.

Julita stays silent for long enough that I might have wondered if she's taken her leave of her own accord. But a faint tingle remains by the back of my skull, that I'm starting to recognize indicates her presence.

Finally, she sighs. *He hasn't done anything at the college that I've been able to uncover. But I know he has an interest in scourge sorcery. Before—he was close friends with my older brother growing up... A little while after their dedication ceremonies, he and Borys both got it into their heads that it would be exciting to expand their magic.*

She doesn't need to elaborate for a chill to run down my back.

A couple of teenage boys dabbling in the most brutal form of sorcery? That sounds like a recipe for a disaster.

Especially when I now have to ask: "How did you find out?"

Julita's next silence stretches even longer. *I'm not sure how far they actually went. I'm not aware of any human sacrifices, and probably they couldn't have gotten away with that. There might have been animals. But they also experimented with mere blood-letting. And since I was younger and right there where my brother could exert his authority, I was the easiest*

subject for them to practice on.

The chill coils right around my gut. Blood-letting.

Only a sacrifice at a dedication ceremony can result in a permanent gift, but under certain circumstances, you can bargain flesh or blood for a temporary effect. It's expected that you bargain your *own* flesh or blood, though.

Julita's brother and Wendos used her in whatever makeshift rituals they were able to cobble together based on the sketchy knowledge of scourge sorcery the average noble kid would be able to dig up. Cutting her. Spilling her blood in smaller sacrifices.

Hoping her pain would lend them power.

Julita's voice turns more strident. *It only lasted a couple of years. Then I dedicated myself and got my own gift, and I could put a stop to it. But it seems like it'd be an incredible coincidence if there's scourge sorcery being practiced at the college right now and Wendos isn't a part of it.*

I can't argue with her logic. "What about your brother? Is he attending the college too?"

He was supposed to, but he was either waylaid or ran off when traveling to Florian. I suspect the latter. Borys was never much for studying... I wouldn't be surprised if he went off to join the infantry so he could see some action.

So there's only Wendos at the college. A frown crosses my lips. "Are you sure that what you've seen is a whole conspiracy and not just Wendos continuing their old experiments?"

Julita shivers. *I wish it were that simple. Even when he and my brother were dabbling together, the daimon on my estate never acted strangely. For them to be so disturbed at the college, it has to be a much larger effort.*

It's hard to argue her logic—both in that and that there's a good chance of Wendos being involved. So why would the men doubt it? "Did you tell Stavros and the others what the two of them used to—"

No, Julita cuts in abruptly. Not the part about me being involved. Just that I could tell he and my brother were getting up to things. I saw some of the materials they used—like the dartling eggshell powder. That should be enough.

From her tone, I don't think she's very happy about having exposed that much of her harrowing childhood even to me.

My gut has twisted into a knot. She spent years getting tortured by

hopeful scourge sorcerers, ran into more the second she left home, and then got murdered by one.

It's hard to imagine that the little bit of information I was able to pass on to her friends is going to be enough to get her justice. And because she's still here in her ghostly form, she'll know that as well as I do.

My mouth moves before I've quite thought through the offer I'm about to make. "There's a place I could ask around. See if anyone involved in black-market dealings has heard about your murder or whatever else to do with illegal sorcery."

The tingle in the back of my head seems to perk up.

Really? Julita says, in a softer but eager tone. *I guess those are the sorts of people you typically mingle with?*

I make a face at her assumption, already feeling a twinge of regret. But the thought of going back on my suggestion now is more horrible than going through with it.

"Not if I can help it. I don't really mingle with *anyone* 'typically.' But I know how to find them when I need them."

Dropping in on Crow's Close will definitely require a costume change, though.



As evening falls, I approach the Frolic Theater in Tangleside, a neighborhood so called because of the confusing twists of its streets. One of my hooded tunics drapes me from the top of my head to mid-thigh, and five knives lie concealed but in easy reach.

The weathered wooden building stands taller and broader than any of the sagging shops around it, its doorless front entrance gaping like a monster's maw. The sigil for Inganne, godden of creativity and amusement, beams overhead in orange paint, with weathered illustrations of larks and butterflies fluttering around it.

We're going to take in a show? Julita asks doubtfully.

"You'll see," I mutter, and push myself onward.

As I climb the two creaking steps outside the entrance, raucous laughter reaches my ears from inside. At the other end of the dim lobby, the stands will be at least half full of locals who needed to brighten their day.

The theater's erratic crew of actors put on comedic pantomimes, puppet shows, and short, silly plays twice a day, charging about the cost of a slice of bread and accepting said slices—or other items—in trade instead of coins if that's all the patron can give.

They can afford to offer their entertainment cheaply because they get a kickback from the theater's other use.

Instead of heading on into the auditorium, I veer toward the first door on the right. A shallow carving of Kosmel's sigil barely shows above it in the dim light.

Any unwitting person stumbling on this doorway would take one look at the darkened, musty stairs on the other side and turn around. I march on downward, wrinkling my nose at the pungent mildewy odor that I'm not sure is totally conjured.

If anyone did venture this far in a fit of daring curiosity, they'd be stymied at the bottom of the stairs. By all appearances, they end at a small, empty, earthen-walled room so dark you can only make out the faint outlines of your fingers when holding your hand in front of your face.

But if you know where you're going, you slip around the left side of the stairs and make a sharp right that should have you walking straight into their underside. Instead, the moment your head would crash into the boards, you find yourself in a passage so black your hand might as well not exist at all.

Five steps forward, three left, ten right, two left again. I can't help wondering whether the criminals who built this passageway were inspired by the college or the other way around—or whether magical security can't help evolving to use the same methods.

With the last step, I walk back out into the earthen room. I lope up the steps and pass through the now-silent lobby. This version of the theater is only a conjured echo of the real thing.

The moment I emerge from the entrance, I'm faced with a mass of activity that's vividly real.

Crow's Close—named after Kosmel's favored bird in recognition of the role the godden of luck plays in the success of any illicit endeavor—takes its name quite literally. The narrow strip of dirt road with wooden buildings packed on either side is entirely enclosed, stopping at a dead end about a hundred paces in either direction. The only way in and out is through the theater.

Well, the only way *I* know. No doubt the crooks who make this place

their permanent residence have other escape routes.

The strip looks like a macabre version of the commercial street near the palace. Conjured illusions gyrate over the shop doors, but with imagery like skulls and weaponry. The lights in the windows glow amber, crimson, and violet in the dusk.

The shoppers are a scruffier lot, with dreary clothing and scars aplenty. Most wear hoods like my own to shade their faces, the more cautious concealing their features with simple masks as well.

But I've got no reputation in the outside world that my presence here could threaten.

The place to get the latest underground gossip is the pub right at the northern dead end, Brew & Dagger. I slink through the strip's other patrons toward it.

The sign over the dark wooden face shows a dagger jabbed into a mug of beer next to the pub's name. The conjured image hovering in front of it mimics the logo, with the blade rising and dropping back into the mug, making the illusionary glowing liquid slosh over the rim.

The inside of the pub smells like stale alcohol and acrid hazebloom smoke. I hop onto one of the empty stools by the scratched-up counter and ask the new bartender for an amber spritz.

As she mixes it, I let my gaze drift around the room, searching for any familiar faces I know will be happy to wag their tongue.

Before I land on one, I get a volunteer.

"If it isn't Ivy. I haven't seen you in a while."

At the voice behind me, I tense inwardly before I've swiveled around to face the speaker. Milo smirks at me, his hooded eyes as dark as his five-o'clock shadow.

Back when I was sixteen and less good at controlling my impulses—and my hormones—Milo seemed like a good option for dealing with those hormones periodically with no strings attached. We'd only had a couple of hookups when I found out that along with perfectly respectable forgery, he has a side-business picking out kids as young as eight for the mines, and my already limited attraction to him snuffed right out.

Four years later, he still hasn't quite caught on that I'd sooner fuck a donkey than get down and dirty with him again.

I grit my teeth and smile tightly back at him. Milo does like to hear his own voice, so this could make my job here easier. As long as he keeps his

hands to himself in the meantime.

I take on a careless tone. “I like to make sure I’m missed. But every now and then I get a craving for an amber spritz that no one makes like this place.”

He thumps his tankard onto the counter next to where the bartender has just slid my own glass. I curl my fingers around the cool surface, planning on keeping my hand and at least part of my gaze on it at all times while Mr. Can’t Take A Hint is hanging around.

“I miss you every day I don’t see that pretty face,” Milo says, with so much grease to the words you could slip and break your arm on them. My magic bristles in my chest before I rein it in.

He’s never actually hurt me... but I’d rather not give him the opportunity.

“Oh, I’m sure you’ve found plenty of other things to keep you busy.” I take a sip of my drink, enjoying the tartly sweet flavor. Brew & Dagger really does make the best cocktails. “I heard there was a bit of a commotion in Slaughterwell... a couple of days back? Something about a noble getting stabbed? That’s your main haunt, isn’t it?”

Milo’s eyes twitch to the side, which tells me he knows exactly what I’m talking about, despite the noncommittal answer he gives me. “Another day, another body. There was a woman found yesterday—pretty stripped down, so what she’d had on before must have been nice, I guess.”

In my head, Julita lets out a sputter of indignation. I ignore her and give another casual nudge. “Anyone bragging about doing the deed?”

“Not that I’ve heard. The whispers about it have been more confused than anything. Whoever offed her, they slunk away fast.”

He shakes his head in grim approval. I don’t see any reason to distrust his answer.

No one around here knows who killed my ghostly passenger. I guess that’s not totally surprising, given that it was probably one of her own, not an outer-warder.

It can’t hurt to see if I can stir up any more information, though.

I bring my glass back to my lips. “Mustn’t be good for business, having the bigwigs from the hill poking around investigating the crime.”

“Oh, *our* bigwigs got things cleaned up quick so that wouldn’t happen.” Milo tips his head toward the door—toward the building that’s both temple to Kosmel and gambling hall in the center of Crow’s Close, where the most powerful crooks rule the roost. “They got to her before any official alert went

out, disappeared the body, all's well."

He raises his eyebrows at me. "Having the Crown's Watch poking around wouldn't be good for *your* business either, huh?"

Milo has always been put out that I won't share the secrets of what I do when I'm not in this place. I can only imagine how he'd exploit the revelation that I'm the one people call the Hand of Kosmel.

If he thinks I'm bringing up the dead woman out of concern for my own criminal activities, that's fine with me. It keeps him off the scent.

I let out a light chuckle, but my thoughts are whirling. It hadn't even occurred to me that Florian's underworld would cover up Julita's murder.

Tensions have risen in the past few years. The Crown's Watch started cracking down more violently on all sorts of crimes—at least, those that affect the citizens they care about—after King Konrad officially inherited the throne from his father.

I suppose it's not surprising that the powers here would rather remove any additional excuse for royal law enforcement to come nosing around.

What does he mean, disappeared the body? Julita demands. They couldn't have just dumped me in a random hole and called that it.

Oh, they could have. I swish a little more alcohol around in my mouth, unable to answer her here and not sure what I'd say anyway.

All trace of her murder will have been wiped away. Other than whatever bits of clothing or jewelry she had on her that desperate scavengers stole, there'll be no sign she was ever in Slaughterwell.

It isn't just that her friends at the college haven't found out she was murdered *yet*. If I don't say anything... they'll never find out at all.

They'll never know just how serious the situation is. Just how far the prospective scourge sorcerers have gone to stop their own crimes from being discovered.

The men might assume she got scared and simply ran. They won't even know to mourn her.

The full reality is obviously sinking in for Julita too. Her voice roughens with a mixture of outrage and dismay.

They can't just— I was slaughtered right here in the city! The Watch should be looking into it. And the fringe scum threw me away like a soiled rag? How am I... How is anyone... It isn't right.

I shift restlessly on my stool and take a larger gulp of my drink.

Milo leans closer. His beer-sour breath gusts over my face. "If you've got

a mind to stick around for a bit...”

“Sorry,” I say, not at all apologetically. “I could only drop in for long enough to grab a quick drink. Good to see you’re doing well.”

I drain the last of the spritz and slide off my stool. Milo makes a grab for my arm, but when I jerk out of the way, he doesn’t follow me.

I stride back out to the street, both my mind and my stomach stewing with everything I took in.

Julita pipes up again, sounding more collected but still raw. *What are you doing now?*

I could leave and tune out the voice in my head until she fades away or dislodges herself in her frustration. It still isn’t my business. It’s not my problem to solve.

But she’s here. I’ve got her.

I’m the only person who knows what happened to her who might care enough to see that her story doesn’t end with its final chapters missing.

The assholes who did this to her aren’t just a threat to the haughty rich in their fancy castle of a school. Their experiments in vicious magic could destroy every person I’ve spent the last eight years trying to help.

If I turn my back on my ghostly guest, I’m turning my back on all of them.

And that might be even worse than anything I’ve done before.

I set off toward a shop with a tendril of greenish smoke wafting from a side window. “I’m going to ask a few more questions. And then the next time we see your friends, I’ll tell them everything I possibly can that’ll take those bastards down.”

NINE



As I raise Julita's bracelet to the gargoyle at the college gate, my heart gives a swift stutter. I swallow against the dryness of my mouth.

Stepping through the opening door, I risk a murmur. "You're sure the password won't have changed since last time?"

The men Julita's working with only have their meetings every two days. It's been three now since she was stabbed in the alley.

Julita's back to what seems to be her usual unflappably confident self. *They only change it once a week, and the last time was six days ago. I'm sure of that. We're good.*

I'd have more faith in her sense of time if she had her own corporeal body to experience it with. Girding myself, I march onward.

Lively fleas—

"I remember."

Lively fleas rip from royalty like ribbons. An absurd phrase, but I'm in the habit of committing every bit of information I can glean to memory. Left, forward, right, forward, right, left, right.

When the door to the first courtyard opens up in front of me with no blare of a conjured alarm or onslaught of furious guards, I exhale in a rush. My nerves shudder at the deluge of cleansing magic, but it washes over me in an instant, and I'm through.

A couple of men are walking over to the gate hand-in-hand. I veer around them on my stroll toward the main college building and wait until they've disappeared through the gate before speaking to my ghostly passenger again.

"I'm going to tell them, I'll let them ask you any questions they can think

of that would help them investigate—and then we’re done.”

The statement feels more like a question than I’m comfortable with. We’ve already hashed the plan out, but I don’t know how much good faith I can expect from my unwanted guest once we’re back on her turf.

An incredibly fair deal, Julita says in a reassuring tone. *I’ll depart from your body if I can determine how, and if I can’t right away, I’ll keep my thoughts to myself while I work it out.*

She sounds like she means it, but her dormmate’s accusing words linger alongside the tingle of Julita’s presence in the back of my skull. She could say anything she wants to keep me cooperating—it’s not as if I have any idea how to force the issue if she goes back on her word.

But it doesn’t really matter. This is the right thing to do.

I’m the one controlling my body. I can make sure I walk back out of here once I’ve fulfilled the mission I agreed to.

The rest I’ll deal with when I get there.

Julita waits patiently while I navigate the campus, taking the same route she directed me on last time. When I tap and tug the scone beside the tapestry of Signy, she lets out a bright chuckle. *You really do have quite the memory.*

“I had to hone every skill I could,” I murmur as I step into the hidden staircase. Every skill other than the riven magic that would both drive me mad and bring the rage of the royal family down on my head. Or rather, on my neck.

From my first days on the streets, I decided I’d just have to make myself as brilliant as possible at everything possible so that I never truly *needed* my monstrous power to survive. So far it’s worked out pretty well, my current dilemma notwithstanding.

I’m lucky it was you who stumbled on me, Julita says. *I can’t imagine if—*

My feet hit the floor of the archives room on the other side of the magical passage, and both Julita’s voice and my breath cut off with the slam of a hand against my throat.

A hand of molded clay rather than flesh, hard enough to choke me with that first jab.

Stavros shoves me back against the reformed wall, his dark eyes searing into mine. A pinch of pain at the base of my throat tells me he’s brought a blade to bear just below his restraining hand.

His mouth twists into a smile so cutting it might as well be a sneer. “So,

you came back. Wonderful. Now you can tell us who you really are.”

My pulse thunders, and my magic flares through my chest with the urge to hurl him off me. I can't reach the knife in my boot or those under my skirts.

I clamp my hands into fists, reining in the burn, and gasp a ragged breath. Does he know what I'm repressing? Did he figure it out somehow?

In my head, Julita is sputtering. *What under the gods' gaze does he think he's doing?*

“I came to help,” I manage to rasp past the harsh pressure of Stavros's hand.

The other men come into view around Stavros, their expressions stormy.

A deep frown taints Casimir's gorgeous face. “If you wanted to help Julita, then she'd be here.”

Alek has his lean arms crossed tightly over his chest. “We've looked into your story. There's no one named Ivy whose family lives in Nikodi.”

Shit and smitings. I'd be glad that they don't sound as if they've discovered my magic, but they're at least two steps ahead of me in my confession. Which'll make it look more like they caught me out than like I'm coming clean on my own.

I scramble for the right thing to say, because blurting out, “I've got your friend's ghost in my head!” doesn't seem likely to go over well as an opening.

At the same moment, my riven magic decides to turn on me too. In response to my defiance, it digs into every crevice in my torso with a sensation like piercing claws.

All I can do is gasp again and tense my muscles against the agony.

Good job, stupid fucking sorcery. Punish me because I strangely don't think it's a fantastic idea to show off my illegal power directly in front of a guy who's dragged people like me straight to the gallows.

What's happening to you? Julita asks frantically. *Tell them what's going on. Tell them— Oh, Great God help me—*

Dizziness washes over me, scrambling my thoughts—and, to my relief, distracting me from the pain. Giving me just enough wherewithal to recognize what's happening.

She did this before, when she was first in my head, when she hadn't talked to me yet. She's trying to take me over.

“You—” I snap before I clamp down on my frustration, and then I wrestle

everything inside me into submission: the magic, its resentful claws, the rebellious ghost attempting to claim my body.

This will not be the last page in my life's story.

Stavros appears to decide he's waited long enough for a coherent answer. He wrenches me around and slams me down in a chair near one of the shelves of records.

Benedikt darts over to yank a rope around my chest and knot it behind me, pinning my arms to my sides.

I might have been able to throw off the binding before he finished tying it if I gave it a shot, but fighting these men isn't going to prove my innocence. And I don't like my chances four against one, especially when the four includes a decorated general.

Julita speaks up with a hint of a quaver in her voice. *I'm sorry. I didn't mean to do it—I panicked about what would happen if I didn't jump in. It won't happen again.*

I don't know if I believe her, but I have bigger problems at the moment.

With the agony of my magic's fit of frustration ebbing, I find my voice. "I came today to tell you the truth. To tell you what happened to Julita."

Stavros looms over me, his chiseled face way too striking when he's this coolly fierce. He only holds my gaze for a second before sweeping his attention over the rest of my body. "Is that so? And why didn't you tell us in the first place?"

"Because the truth sounds fucking insane." I can't stop myself from glowering at him. My magic keeps roiling inside me, pricking at my innards, which isn't improving my mood. "I thought it was easier that way, and you'd find out everything else you need to know later. But it turns out that won't happen, so here I am."

If Stavros is cool, then Alek is outright ice. "Why should we believe anything you say now?"

My gaze slides to his masked face. Even partly covered, I can tell his expression is grim. "Why don't you hear it and then decide? What exactly do you think my evil plan here would be?"

Benedikt tips his golden head back against the shelves. "As much as I'd like to think you simply enjoy our company, it seems more probable that you were spying on our plans. Or attempting to mislead us. Or both."

You should just tell them, Julita murmurs. They're only doing this because they're worried about me.

I don't want to feel particularly sympathetic to the men who are currently holding me bound and under blade, but their response does make sense. And shows an almost admirable protective devotion to their missing friend—if that's really all they see her as.

I wet my lips. Spilling the beans is going to be even more awkward than I thought.

"You've guessed that something's gone wrong for Julita," I venture, letting my noble diction slide. What does it matter when they'll know in a minute or two how far from noble I am? "That's why you checked the records for me?"

"She's been missing for three *days*," Alek spits out. "She wouldn't leave for that long without giving us any idea what lead she's following."

Casimir nods, but his voice is softer. "You'd be the last person who saw her. You have her bracelet."

Stavros has straightened up over me, making his massive frame even more intimidating. He adjusts the short sword in his grasp casually but with an ease that speaks of his skill. "I think we should be the ones asking the questions, and you should be answering. What happened to Julita? Let's hear everything you know, and be quick about it."

I raise my chin. "To be clear from the start, *I* didn't do anything to hurt her. These scourge sorcerers you're after must have figured out she was on their trail. I was going about my business in Slaughterwell, and I heard a cry. I found—"

Seeing how the men's stances have stiffened, I hesitate. Am I really going to toss their friend's murder in their faces this bluntly?

"You found what?" Stavros prods.

I guess there really isn't any way around it.

"I found her lying in an alley with a knife through her neck," I say, a little quieter than before. "I tried to stop the bleeding, but the wound was so—"

Alek flinches. "She's *dead*?" His hand flicks down his front in the gesture of the divinities.

Casimir's pine-green eyes have widened. Stavros's broad shoulders flex as if he's bracing for the answer.

There's only one I can possibly give. "Yes."

Benedikt sags against the shelves, the cockiness of his stance deflating.

Alek's lips part, but no sound comes out. He takes a few steps backward to sink into one of the chairs around the central desk and drops his head into

his hands.

Stavros works his jaw, his eyes outright blazing, his hand clenching around the grip of his sword. But when he speaks, his voice is as coolly confident as ever. “Those gods-damned wretches. They’ll regret every drop of her blood they spilled ten times over. We’ll see how much they like their sorcery then.”

“If we’d gone with her instead of letting her carry out her investigations alone...” Casimir says in a thin voice. His rosy skin has faded to a sickly pallor.

Benedikt snorts, though he still looks sick himself. “As if any of us were ‘letting’ Jules do anything. She wouldn’t have let *us* expose ourselves that way.” His pale gaze flicks to me again with sharper focus. “Assuming the imposter is telling the truth and not spinning a lovely tale to hide her own wrongdoing.”

Alek’s head jerks up. The combined weight of four hostile stares sets my skin crawling.

I grimace at them. “Why would I have done anything to Julita? I didn’t even know her before the moment I found her.”

Stavros cocks his head, considering. His gaze flicks away and back to me. “The conspirators could have paid you off.”

“Paid you to spy on us too,” Benedikt adds, warming up to his theory. “Very clever.”

“I wouldn’t have taken a job like that,” I say. “And I haven’t told you everything yet. I came to talk to you in the first place because— This is the part that sounds insane. When I was trying to help Julita and she died, somehow or other, her soul... passed into me.”

Stavros’s eyebrows arch. Casimir blinks, peering at me more intently as if he thinks he might see a glimmer of the woman he obviously cared about through my flesh.

Benedikt barks a laugh. “Now *that’s* a story for the ages! We’re getting a real tall tale.”

I catch my teeth on the verge of gritting. “I know it’s hard to believe, but it’s true. How else would I have known how to find you? Do you really think Julita would have given you all away just because someone threatened her?”

Julita lets out an indignant huff. *Really. They should know me better.*

Alek starts to shake his head, but Stavros rakes his gaze over me. “She was made of strong stuff, but that doesn’t mean she was infallible.”

I glare at him. “Well, if I was lying, don’t you think I’d have picked a less ridiculous lie? Look, she’s with me right now. You want proof? Ask me anything only she would know, something no interrogator would possibly have thought to find out from her. It shouldn’t be hard to confirm.”

I have the impression of Julita clapping her hands together. *Yes. Excellent idea. They can’t deny that.*

My shoulders are starting to ache from how tightly my arms are restrained at my sides, but I hold myself still with as much patience as I can muster. The men glance at each other in silent deliberation.

Casimir has knit his brow. “Have you ever heard of a partial ghostly possession, Alek?”

Alek’s mouth slants at a pensive angle. “No. Nothing like what she’s talking about has come up in any of the records of unusual magic I’ve searched out.”

Stavros sighs. “She’s right—there’s an easy way to find out. Let’s see... Something only we would know, that has nothing to do with our investigations so it wouldn’t have come up in questioning. How’s this: What did she tell Aleksii about his mask the last time we were all together?”

That’s easy, Julita says immediately. He should get himself a silver one made. It’d set off his skin wonderfully.

That’s the kind of conversation she was having while plotting to reveal a deadly conspiracy?

My voice comes out dry. “She thought he should get a silver one.”

The men all go nearly as still as they did when Alek asked whether Julita was dead. Benedikt gives a low whistle.

Before he can speak, Stavros holds up his hand. It’s obvious he considers himself in charge of this bunch even if he isn’t rallying armies anymore.

His gaze bores into mine. “What color dress was she wearing that day?”

Interesting that *he* paid enough attention to what she was wearing that he’ll be able to judge the answer.

I wouldn’t have a clue what I’d had on any given day of the week if I didn’t always wear pretty much the same thing, but Julita is clearly diligent about her fashion choices. *It was the lavender purple one with silver beading on the sleeves.* Then, in a conspiratorial hush as if she thinks he might overhear her otherwise, *That’s his favorite.*

I meet his eyes steadily. “Lavender with silver beading on the sleeves.”

Alek pipes up in a stiff voice. “What book did she suggest Casimir should

pick up?”

Honestly, how much proof do they need? The latest volume by Willam of Ockarton on musical theory.

“Willam of Ockarton’s most recent book about musical theory.” I slide my gaze over each of them in turn. “Do you really think *anyone* would have thought to ask her about all this before they killed her?”

“No,” Casimir says quietly. He steps closer, hesitation muting the grace of his lithe body. But as he stares at me, hope kindles in his eyes. “Jules? You’re really here?”

Oh, Cas, Julita murmurs in a tone so fond my gut knots up. All at once, I feel like an intruder in my own body. Tell him I’m sorry. I thought I’d taken every precaution...

My voice comes out rough. “She’s apologizing because she thinks she mustn’t have been careful enough.”

Benedikt has pushed off the shelves to take a better look at me. Alek’s gaze is fixed on me too, his expression a mix of awe and incredulity, as if he can’t wrap his head around the idea that the woman he appears to have adored ended up in a person like me.

Stavros takes a step back like he needs to get a wider view—or maybe he’s giving the other men room to study me. His fingers flex around the sword’s hilt, and then he shoves it into the scabbard at his waist.

“Have you tried to let her *out*?” he asks.

I give him a pointed look. “I didn’t even let her *in*. It just happened—I have no idea how. And she hasn’t tried to leave yet, as far as I know, because if her soul passes on at that point, there’ll be no way for her to communicate with you.”

Julita stirs in my head. *Are they going to untie you already? You’re technically my guest—in any case, you’re doing me an immense favor. They really should show better hospitality.*

My lips twitch upward of their own accord, and Alek’s eyes harden again. “Is something about this situation funny to you?”

I give a brief, humorless laugh. “Not particularly. But Julita’s concerned about your manners. She’s a little put out that you still have me tied to a chair.”

Something flashes across Stavros’s face too swiftly for me to identify, but my remark must sound like the Julita he knows. He strides forward, unsheathing his sword again, and severs the rope just below my shoulder so

the whole coil falls away.

I shake the loops off and spring up from the chair, my nerves jangling with discomfort at the restraints. But I don't move very far. This situation still feels far too volatile.

"You have to understand," I say, before the conversation can become any more awkward, "I'm helping Julita because she made a good case, and I don't want to see scourge sorcerers running rampant. But there's only so much I can do. You needed to know that they killed her, and I'll answer any other questions you have for her. Then I'm going to leave, and *she's* going to leave—like her soul normally would have in the first place."

"That's fair," Casimir says softly, although he looks haunted himself.

Stavros clears his throat with a hint of a scoff. "You want to get back to your life. However much of a life you have if your 'business' happens in Slaughterwell. You're obviously not noble-born. What's your real name, and what exactly *is* your business, hmm?"

I itch to make up a story, to claim some typical fringe career. But the men have already shown they'll go to great lengths to confirm my honesty.

If I want them to believe me enough to get through this conversation properly, I have to actually be honest.

I set my hands on my hips. "My name really is Ivy, and my business is mostly making sure I stay alive. I scavenge what I need."

"Scavenge," Stavros repeats sardonically. "That sounds like a polite way of saying you take what doesn't belong to you. It doesn't seem as if this is the first time you've posed as someone you're not, either. If you're planning on taking advantage of the situation and running some other con—"

"That's not what I'm here for," I interrupt, getting reacquainted with the desire to stab the infuriatingly arrogant man. "If I've ever lifted a thing or two to get by, it was only what was necessary and from people who could afford the loss."

I'm not going to give him a full accounting of my activities in the fringes. For all I know, he'd find my wealth redistribution tactics nearly as offensive as my magic.

As it is, a mocking edge creeps into his voice. "So you're a thief. Of all the people to find Julita—"

"Julita was cautious," I interrupt. "I'm sure you all know that. She wouldn't have shared her secrets with me if she'd seen any reason to distrust my motives."

Casimir glances at the former general. “She’s right. Does what she did before really matter? She brought Julita to us—we should be grateful.”

Alek dips his head in a jerk. “We need to find out everything she can tell us from Julita about the people who came for her.”

Stavros sighs but motions for me to go ahead.

Finally! Julita mutters.

I suck in a breath, sharing her impatience. The sooner I’m out of this stuffy room, the better.

“The basics you already know. The knife I described to you at the last meeting—that’s the weapon that killed her. She didn’t see who did it. She says she felt a blast of wind right before she was stabbed, so it’s possible the murderer has a gift involving weather and used it to distract her.”

“And the temple you mentioned?” Alek says.

“She was on her way to check it for signs of collusion with the scourge sorcerers when she was murdered. So she assumes it is involved somehow, that the conspirators found out she was going there and decided it was better to kill her first.”

Stavros rubs his jaw. “I gave a friend on the Crown’s Watch an excuse to have someone keeping an eye on that area the past couple of days. So far they haven’t noticed any unusual activity.”

I shrug. “I can only tell you what I know. Maybe the would-be sorcerers warned the person at the temple who’s been helping them and they’re being extra careful now. Or maybe it was something else that made them worried about Julita.”

Benedikt ambles through the room, tapping his lips in an erratic rhythm. “Did she tell anyone where she was going?”

I pause to give Julita time to answer.

Of course not. But I was working my way through all the temples on the outskirts of the city. They might have been able to predict where I was going next.

“No, but they might have guessed based on where she went before,” I supply.

“Did she notice anyone in particular nearby when she left the college?” Casimir asks.

At Julita’s *No*, I shake my head.

Stavros looks at me. “Did *you* see anyone around when you found her body?”

“No. The street was empty, and there was no one else in the alley. But I wasn’t right there. There was time for someone to have taken off down the alley before I reached her.”

Alek hesitates before speaking up again. “What happened to her body? Why hasn’t it been found?”

I can answer that one too. “I did a little poking around through my less-than-savory connections. It seems the major criminal elements in the city were concerned that the murder of a noble in their streets would bring unwanted attention, so they cleaned things up. But it sounded as if the murder was random, as far as they were concerned. Really, if any of the black-market lords were involved, there wouldn’t have been a body for *me* to find.”

As Stavros grunts in response, Casimir offers me a slight but warm smile. “You know, you might not have the typical noble cadence, but you don’t sound like you’re fringe-born either.”

My jaw tightens. “I do a lot of reading. It expands one’s vocabulary, I hear.”

I’m not going to share any details of my childhood when I don’t have to.

“A well-read thief!” Stavros says. “Even better. Which specific alley did the murder happen in?”

While I tell him the nearest streets, Julita’s presence shifts restlessly. *I wish there was something else I could tell them. Here I am, evidence of the most obvious crime these degenerates have committed, and I can’t even give the Crown’s Watch proof!*

The men don’t seem to know what else to prod her about either. But in their momentary silence, I remember my peace offering.

I reach back through my memory for the names I got out of the Crow’s Close apothecary last night. “I did also take the time to do some looking into the dartling eggshell powder you were trying to track down. Someone involved in underground dealings was able to give me the names of three shops that he sometimes provides a supply to for selling unofficially.”

Alek’s eyes brighten. “What were those?”

I rattle off the three names, and his gaze goes briefly distant as he must commit the information to memory. I suppose like me he has his reasons for not wanting to keep a written record of this particular endeavor.

Benedikt gives me a bemused look. “You decided to chase down that fact out of the blue?”

“Not out of the blue. Julita explained why it was significant. I was already

asking around about her murder. I figured I might as well check that too, since it could make a difference.”

All at once, Casimir’s smile widens. “Yes, it could. And Inganne has blessed me with a fantastic idea.”

I look at him warily. “What?”

“Julita could pick up on all kinds of clues that we couldn’t because of her observations of her brother’s attempted rituals,” he says. “Without her, the rest of us wouldn’t have realized the problem in the first place. I don’t know how far we’ll get without her. But we don’t have to be without her.”

Benedikt lets out a sputter of a chuckle as he spins toward the other man. “You can’t really be suggesting—”

Casimir splays his slender hands. “Why not? She’s still *here*. She and Ivy are obviously getting along reasonably well. And Ivy played noble well enough that we all believed it during our first meeting. If we can set her up in the school, she can keep investigating with us.”

He glances back at me, his eyes sparkling eagerly. “You said there’s only so much you can do—but you can do this too. It could make a huge difference.”

Alek frowns. “We do need to catch the conspirators as quickly as possible. I don’t like how much the daimon are already acting up around the school. But we can’t enroll a new student out of nowhere with no credentials or family history.”

“She doesn’t have to be a student.” Casimir snaps his fingers. “Stav, you were about to put out a call for a new assistant. Take Ivy on. That gives her every excuse to roam the college.”

“I suppose I could adjust the right records so anyone else who looks would see a family with a daughter named Ivy living in Nikodi...” Alek says hesitantly.

I open my mouth to protest, but the former general beats me to it. “Hold on a second. I need an assistant who can actually *assist*, not some scrawny Slaughterwell street rat.”

Just like that, I’m bristling. “I’ll have you know I could have stabbed you a dozen times already if I wasn’t being nice.”

Stavros snorts. “Maybe you’d like to think so.”

If he had any idea the men twice my size I’ve had to fend off, the aim and reflexes I’ve spent years honing. He’s faced the danger of warfare, sure, but he has no clue what it’s like battling just to stay alive when you have nothing.

Er, Ivy... Julita says. You do remember he's one of the most celebrated soldiers in the kingdom, right?

Oh, I haven't forgotten for a second.

"You want to try me?" I retort, my fingers itching for my nearest knife.

A gleam feral enough to be unnerving lights in Stavros's eyes. "Really? If you insist, I suppose a *very* brief demonstration could set the matter to rest for everyone. Let's see you strip first."

My jaw drops. "Excuse me?"

He flicks his hand to indicate my dress. "No one can fight at their best in a gown. And if we're doing this, I want to have a look at what kind of muscle you're working with. So, strip."

TEN



Casimir gives a faint cough. “Ah, Stavros, this wasn’t quite what I had in—”

The former general jabs his finger in the courtesan’s direction. “It was your idea. I wouldn’t think *you* would have your sensibilities offended by a woman’s bare limbs.”

Bare *limbs*. He doesn’t want me getting totally naked, just taking off the dress so I can move more easily in my underclothes.

It’s still ridiculous. I didn’t even want to linger in the college for more than an hour today.

But I’ve spent the past three days getting yanked in all kinds of directions I wouldn’t have chosen, and this is one thing I know I can do all on my own.

It’d be worth a bushel of gold to knock the cocky expression off this asshole’s face.

From his sharp grin of anticipation, I can’t tell whether the massive man is getting off more on the idea that I *will* accept his challenge or that I’ll fold. Either way, he expects to prove me a weakling.

Like it hasn’t taken plenty of guts just walking into this den of snakes.

I tweak the skirt of my faux-silk dress, considering the coverage beneath. The last thing I want is any of these men noticing the unmarked skin between my breasts.

Not having dedicated oneself to a godden and accepted their brand at twelve isn’t an executable crime like the riven magic that prompted my decision, but it’s rare enough that the godless are viewed with suspicion. I’d rather not raise any questions about why I’ve forgone the standard ritual and

shunned the gods' favor.

But the short, sleeveless shift I have on is made of the same densely woven cotton as my drawers. The neckline rests just below that of the dress, which only skims my collarbones.

Unless one of Julita's men takes a mind to yank the collar forward and peer down my chest, I'm safe.

I wouldn't assume that's impossible if I was here alone, but they know Julita is watching too. I can't imagine any of them manhandling me too badly while I'm hosting her in my body.

I match Stavros's confident, nonchalant air. "Fine." Then I reach behind myself to loosen the laces.

Casimir slips over to assist, leaning close enough that the warmth of his graceful body tickles over me with a whiff of honeyed sandalwood. "You really don't have to do this. He's being a prick."

"A prick who wants to know what I'm supposedly hiring on." Stavros swipes his hands together and props himself against the desk as he watches. "Let's not take too long about it. I do have other things to do, Thief."

My jaw clenches. "I apologize for not having the gift of being able to send my clothes into thin air with the snap of a finger."

Benedikt guffaws. "Now that would be a talent worth having."

Ignoring the gazes trained on me, I step away from Casimir and shimmy out of the loosened dress. As it pools around my boots, leaving me in my underthings and the plain petticoat that would never have passed for a noble's if anyone had been able to see it, Stavros gives his head the odd twitch I noticed when we first met and narrows his eyes.

Maybe noticing that my arms, while gangly, have plenty of wiry muscle packed onto them that was previously hidden by my sleeves. Maybe re-evaluating his assessment just a tad already.

Then Casimir inhales sharply. "What happened to you? Who *did* this?"

He reaches a tentative hand toward my back but stops a few inches shy of the skin.

Oh. Right. I'm so used to my scars that I didn't consider how they'd be visible at the top of my shoulder blades.

"It was a long time ago and not a big deal," I say curtly, but Stavros is already striding over.

He makes another twitching gesture with his head before peering at the mottled ridges that protrude from beneath my shift. "Those look like whip

lashes. That's not a typical punishment for stealing." His tone darkens. "What worse crime did you commit?"

Of course he'd assume that.

I make my voice as hard and cool as I can. "It wasn't a whip, and it wasn't punishment for a crime." At least, not in the way he's thinking. "My mother was very enthusiastic with a belt. Like I said, it was a long time ago. There are reasons a person ends up fending for themselves on the streets. Can we continue?"

Casimir looks sick as the implications sink in. Stavros's mouth tightens, but after his gaze slides over my back again, he eases aside.

Can he tell the difference between a whip and a belt when he looks closely?

I don't really care how much he believes me. Mostly I want them to stop looking at the evidence that I'm not totally unbreakable.

Julita's obviously caught on too, maybe more clearly than any of the men, since she's seen how I live in full detail. *Gods, Ivy. Your parents did that to you? I can't imagine—I didn't realize—*

"It's fine," I say softly, just to her, not caring what the men make of the statement.

Benedikt lifts his chin toward the white ribbon tied around my upper arm. "What's that for?"

An image flashes through my mind of the length of white rippling through Linzi's hair as my little sister scampered through our yard. I brush my fingers over the worn fabric with a pang through my chest. "Just a memento I like to keep on me."

To make sure I never forget what I am, even if I don't want anyone else finding out.

I glance toward the thin belt tucked under the waistline of my shabby petticoat. "Should I strip my weapons too, or am I allowed to keep those as part of the test?"

Alek lets out a strangled sound, but Stavros takes the question in stride. He touches the pommel of his short sword. "Let's keep it to one each. It wouldn't do to give you an unfair advantage."

He's returned to his cocky tone that walks the line between teasing and outright mockery. He thinks my question was funny, does he?

I undo the tie on the petticoat and let that fall too. Then I reach for the small sheaths on the belt, the same beige as the fabric of my undergarments

to blend in.

One knife, two knives, tiny enough that they barely added any bulk to my hips but sharp enough to gut a man. I set those on the nearest shelf in front of the dusty leather volumes there and then bend down to retrieve one slightly longer blade from each boot. I kept my favorite in my left hand while I set aside the other.

Benedikt breaks into chortling laughter. “She carries more metal than you do, Stav. Oh, I do like this one. Julita picked well.”

I don't think picked is the right word, Julita remarks, and pauses. But it's hard to imagine getting a better companion for this situation. Kosmel must have smiled on me.

I don't bother to correct Benedikt. My attention remains on my theoretical opponent.

Stavros has marked my show of disarming with a twist of his mouth that looks as though it's not sure whether to become a grin or a grimace. When I meet his eyes, he lets out a brief chuckle and draws his sword. “Is that all?”

“As much as it was worth bothering with in that dress,” I say, rolling my shoulders. “Am I suitably on display for your evaluation?”

I'd imagine all four of these men have seen women in much greater undress than my current state. I'm only slightly less covered than if I were in summer peasant garb. *I've been much more undressed with more than one man before, albeit under very different circumstances.*

Still, my skin shivers under the rake of the former general's gaze. I resist the urge to peek down and confirm that my lack of a godlen brand isn't somehow blazing through my shift.

This might not have been my wisest move ever. But I can't back down now.

“It'll do,” Stavros says. “Let's see how well you can use that toy.”

Without any further warning, he lunges.

Thankfully, I know better than to trust a noble or an arrogant asshole to play fair. I've been tensed for attack since the moment I grasped my knife.

The former general might be fast for his size, but I'm faster—and there's not a whole lot of me for him to grab. I whip to the side and duck under the sweep of his prosthetic hand.

As I dart behind him, he yanks his massive frame around to face me again. He waggles his arm with the prosthetic. “You're lucky. I'm equipped for keeping up appearances right now, not for a fight.”

I snort. “I’m not sure why it matters when you didn’t come close to touching me regardless.”

Benedikt and Casimir have pulled back to the edges of the room. Alek retreats from the desk, his lips pursing beneath his mask. “Do we really need to do this *here*?”

“I won’t damage your precious archives, scholar,” Stavros says. “Don’t worry, it’ll be over soon enough.”

Oh, he thinks so, does he?

He springs forward again with a little more respect, feinting to one side and pivoting in the other direction. I have to skid across the floor even lower to avoid a blow, but I slide by close enough to rap the grip of my knife against his muscular calf. “First blood.”

Symbolically, anyway.

Stavros mutters a curse, but a fierce light has come into his eyes that’s almost giddy. It gives him a maniacal air that sets off a peal of warning through my nerves.

He gives his head that odd tiny shake again, and I frown at him. “What are you doing when you twitch your head like that?”

His grimace-y grin widens. “Let’s stay on topic.”

Of course, Julita knows. *It’s because of his battle injury. It messed with his sight. He can’t fully focus on anything for more than a second or—*

I miss the rest of her answer and any chance to ponder the implications of the former general being partly blind when Stavros barrels forward.

It’s clear in an instant that he was holding back before. I hope to the gods he isn’t even now.

He jabs left and right, shifting on his feet to block my escape, corralling me into a corner. I’ve never faced an opponent like this.

My heart thumps faster. I flick out my knife to deflect a swipe of his sword that would have sliced open the bare skin above my shift’s collar if he wasn’t going to temper the strike. The impact reverberates through my bones.

He *is* going to pull his punches, right? Surely he isn’t planning to actually spill *my* blood.

It’s getting harder to tell. Up until this point, my magic has kept to a persistent but low-level nagging, knowing I asked for this fight, that it’s not meant to be actually threatening. Now my power starts to prick more deeply at my innards for me to bring it to bear.

I make a few more testing jabs, but Stavros deflects all of them, coming

on like a windstorm. I don't have much choice but to vault onto the desk and leap from there right over his head.

One of the other men takes a sharp breath, but even that move doesn't faze Stavros. He's whirled around before my feet have even smacked into the ground. I nearly trip over them scrambling away from his renewed onslaught.

Gods above, he is a warrior through and through. I might admire his skill a little if he wasn't attempting to belittle me with it.

Despite my sparse clothing, sweat trickles down my back. I feel like I've held my own far better than he could have expected—well enough to prove I don't deserve his mockery.

But he's still going to look down his nose at me if he wins, as if I can be blamed for not having the might of a war-hardened soldier.

If this were a real fight, if I thought I was battling for my life, I'd have already flung my knife into his chest or his gut. It's a little hard to prove that without dealing a potentially fatal wound, though.

Well, sometimes a draw is plenty good enough to settle the score.

I weave and bob, but Stavros is boxing me in even more tightly than before, and there's no handy desk at this end of the room. I can feel the impending moment when he'll bowl me right over.

At any second, my power will attempt to disembowel me for ignoring its demands to help.

So I push into his attacks instead, picking my time, embracing the fight for my own purposes.

Stavros shoves me against the wall with his prosthetic hand. My right arm jerks up against his other wrist to slow the slice of his sword toward my throat.

Aiming the full intensity of his wild grin at me, he presses against my blocking arm to show how easily he could overcome my strength with the power of his bulging shoulders. His scent wafts over me, heated with a smoky peppery bite.

This close, I realize there's something chaotic about his dark eyes too. The ring of deep brown around the pupil blends into a rich blue around the edges, as if his makers couldn't quite decide what color they should be.

If he truly can't focus his gaze that well, he's doing a damned good job of faking it.

He swivels his blade to tap the flat against my throat. "And that's where you'd be dead."

I smile back at him. “And you’d be rutting with a stump.”

Stavros’s gaze snaps downward—to where my knife is poised just above his groin. Nothing but the fabric of his trousers lies between his dick and my very sharp blade.

If he’s honest with himself, he’ll have to recognize that I could have cut off one very important appendage before he managed to get his sword into my neck.

There’s a moment of silence as he takes in our pose. Benedikt breaks it with a whoop and a round of applause. “You two should start putting on shows. I’d pay good money to watch that again.”

With a dismissive sound, Stavros pushes away from me. He rams his sword into its scabbard and rakes his fingers through his dark hair, his expression gone coolly implacable again.

I like him better when he looks like a madman.

The thought shakes me as if I’ve been slapped. In the middle of revealing Julita’s death and sparring with the man both verbally and physically, I started to forget he’s the same smug general who smiled while a riven sorcerer like me swung from a noose.

I shouldn’t *like* him any which way. He really would slit my throat if he knew of the power I’m hiding.

Julita has gotten a little breathless. *Oh, that was brilliant. He’s never going to live that down. Nicely played, Ivy.*

Before I can decide how to feel about her eager praise, Casimir eases toward us again, his head tilted to the side with an amused air. “Well, I think we’ve seen that Ivy is at least fully capable of acting as your assistant. Unless you had duties that require sluggishness.”

“No,” Stavros says noncommittally. “She’ll do. But are we really going to do this? Send a petty criminal to mingle with your peers?”

I’d bristle all over again at the remark if he hadn’t reminded me what the whole challenge was supposedly about in the first place. “Just a second—”

“We need Julita,” Alek says firmly before I can go on. “And she comes with Ivy. That’s all there is to it.”

I cross my arms. “There is more to it. I get some say. Who says I *want* to ‘mingle’ with the lot of you?”

Alek stares at me. “But you just— What was the fight for, if you aren’t planning on staying?”

I wave my knife toward Stavros before tucking it back into my boot and

reaching for my discarded petticoat. “For reminding him not to assume he can judge someone based on knowing a whole three things about them.”

Casimir makes his protest in a gentler fashion. “You said you wanted to help—that you don’t want to see the scourge sorcerers succeed. There’s no better way you can do that than by helping our investigations right here.”

“You mean by doing way more than any of *you* have had to. Would you toss aside your whole life to spy on people who hate you?”

“None of us hate you,” Casimir says.

At the same moment, Stavros guffaws. “So eager to get back to thieving?”

I cast my gaze toward the former general and give the courtesan a pointed look. Stavros rolls his eyes skyward. “I don’t hate you. I will think less of you if all that showing off was only for your ego.”

I wrinkle my nose at him. “And why were *you* doing it, exactly?”

Before he has to answer, Alek speaks up again. “But it’ll affect you too if the scourge sorcerers get bolder. If they draw more people into their cult without being checked. You must know about the Great Retribution—”

“Yes,” I snap. “We do hear the stories even in the gutter.”

But his comment hits on the reason I came here in the first place, the reason I listened to Julita at all. All the people these four men don’t care about, who’ll suffer more than they could conceive of if the godlen burn the continent in punishment all over again.

Julita remains unusually silent. Maybe she’s giving me space to make my own decision.

It’s not as if it’s any secret what course of action she’d prefer.

If she insisted, I think I’d put my foot down and march right out of there. But faced with nothing but the turmoil of my own thoughts in my head, I hesitate.

“I’m not saying no. I just—it’s a lot. You could at least give me a chance to think about it before you start building plans around me.”

Benedikt pipes up. “I’d say she has a point.”

Stavros sinks into one of the chairs and sprawls out his legs. “Think away. But I do have a staff meeting where I’ll be missed happening in an hour.”

“Wonderful,” I mutter. Why am I even considering their scheme? I should walk out of here like I intended and put as much distance between me and the whole college as—

A vibration passes through the air, so faint I don't think any of the men pick up on it. The sense of it quivers through my broken soul.

But they couldn't fail to notice the cracking sound or the spidery line that abruptly splits through two of the stones lining the unplastered basement walls between two of the shelving units. A rain of fine dust and a few pebbles drizzle onto the floor.

Benedikt shudders. "Those damned daimon."

"They can't help it," Casimir says. "They're unsettled—even more than we are."

Alek's expression has tensed. "It's only going to get worse as the scoundrels get bolder with their sorcery. We can't know how long it'll take before the godlen themselves realize. They can't pay close attention to every single gift they dole out across the continent, but if those gifts start being used to challenge their divine power, it won't escape their notice for long."

The scholar's gaze fixes on me. "Helping us will be a sacrifice, but how is it not worth it? Do you really want to find out how the godlen will judge you if they discover that you could have stood in the way and didn't?"

If he thinks the threat of godly punishment is going to sway me, he couldn't be farther from the mark. If they ever pay that much attention to me, I'm toast for reasons already long established.

But his words shake loose something else inside me, like a crack splitting down my center to let a small glow of unexpected hope seep through.

It *would* be a sacrifice.

A huge one. I'd pretty much be giving my whole life over to preventing a catastrophe that both offends the gods and could destroy thousands of innocent people.

If I pull it off... If I make myself the key to exposing the conspiracy and seeing the despicable sorcerers brought to justice, while risking my neck the whole time... *Could* I walk into the Temple of the Crown and ask for a blessing?

Would the godlen believe I'd earned the boon of having my soul healed, my magic wiped away, and my past crimes forgiven?

I've never imagined there was any way I could fully absolve myself even in my own conscience. This—this is an opportunity that doesn't come along in most people's lifetimes.

I'm never going to be another Signy, brandishing my sword on a mountaintop against the forces of oppression. But I can play hero just like I

can play noble, right?

And as heroes go, playing is essentially the same as being if I can manage to see the task through.

My mind darts to the realities of the life I would be leaving behind. The dark attic with scraps of fabric for a bed. The constant wariness as I roam the streets.

There's my makeshift family of the fringes too, but I'll be serving them even better if I prevent another retribution than by tossing a few coins their way.

A swell of resolve rushes up inside me. I wet my lips and push the words out before I lose my nerve.

"All right. I'm in."

ELEVEN



It takes me approximately five minutes to start regretting my boldness. Right at the point when Stavros shoves open the door he's led me to on the fourth floor of the Domi and says, "These are my quarters. You'll be staying here."

My mouth opens and closes and opens again. "What? Assistants don't get their own rooms?"

I'm going to be living in the same space as the man who's hunted people like me?

He ushers me inside with a tap of my back that I dart forward to escape. We step into a living space about the same size as the common room Julita shared with nine other students.

The space is laid out with a sofa and two armchairs around a hearth, an expansive marlwood desk surrounded by matching bookshelves, a small but elegant dining table with four chairs around it, and a cabinet that holds several expensive-looking liquor bottles.

A tiny private shrine to Sabrelle stands in the corner, the table laid with a scarlet cloth. A wooden carving placed in the middle shows a stallion and a stag holding up the godden of warfare and might's sharply curving sigil.

I'll be keeping far away from that.

Stavros kicks the door shut behind us and gives me one of those inscrutable looks as if I've both amused and pissed him off. "Assistants who are also students live in the student dorms. Assistants who go through the standard official process to get hired on by the college administration share two-bedroom apartments on the staff floor. Assistants we don't want anyone

looking too closely at get the sofa.”

I wrinkle my nose at his dry tone. “And no one’s going to find *that* suspicious?”

“I’m allowed a few whims. I’ll just tell them I so *desperately* needed someone of your talents as my assistant that I required your presence from daybreak onward.”

One corner of his mouth crooks up in a grin, which annoyingly makes him even more imposingly attractive than before. “That means I’ll need to put you to work shortly. Around students and other staff, you’ll need to remember to refer to me by my proper professorial title—Ster. Stavros.”

“Because you’re obviously a paragon of wisdom,” I say cooperatively. Although maybe it suits him—it is pretty arrogant of professors to call themselves by a shorter form of Estera, the godden of learning and knowledge, as if they’re lesser divinities themselves.

Stavros ignores my understated sarcasm. He sweeps his gaze over me, making my skin itch in awareness of his assessment. “And I’d better find some training clothes so you won’t look totally ridiculous.”

He spins on his heel and reaches for the gleaming doorknob. “I’ll be back in an hour or so. Try not to steal anything in the meantime.”

“I wouldn’t—” I start to protest, but he’s gone before I can make an effective retort.

That’s just Stav for you, Julita says in mild consolation. You don’t have to worry about staying here. He can be both a brute and an ass, but when it comes to anything more intimate, he’ll behave like the gentleman he is.

Does she think I was worried about him coming on to me?

“I’m used to having my own space,” I say. “I don’t love that he could barge into the room at any moment.”

Ivy, your previous bedroom was a dust-choked attic you had to flee every morning before the legitimate inhabitants caught you.

“I know. But it was just me at night.”

I think you’ll find a way to survive.

Now *she’s* taking on that dry tone with me, as if I’m being absurd to have standards of privacy.

I can’t say what I’m really worried about, which is basically that he’ll kill me. Or rather, drag me off so the king can have me killed.

It amounts to the same thing.

Although with the way this situation is going, the greatest risk might be

that at some point he's going to irritate me so much that I kill *him*—which'll put me up for execution anyway, so there's no point in debating the details.

I venture a little farther into the room. With each inhalation, the smell of the place seeps deeper into my lungs: the polished wood, a faint lingering tang of fancy alcohol, a more acrid note that I think might be the oil nobles use to protect their swords.

Lovely.

And there's also, when I step closer to the door left ajar that I assume leads to Stavros's bedroom, a whiff of the smoky pepper scent that comes from the man himself.

I'm going to be *steeping* in him. I'll take the dusty books any day.

Julita gathers herself in a way I can sense before she speaks. *Ivy... What's really going on with the pain you feel? You were obviously in significant physical distress after Stavros grabbed you in the archives room, and it wasn't anything he did directly. I've felt it a little bit here and there before, but that was... unnerving.*

Oh, it's unnerving for *her*?

I bite back a snarky reply, my stomach knotting as I consider my answer. Even if I control everything she can tell the outside world, I don't really want her knowing exactly who—and what—she's ended up tied to.

She could definitely make my life more difficult.

"I've got a bit of a nervous condition," I improvise. "Chronic pain. It acts up the most when something particularly jarring and threatening happens, that's all. Most things don't faze me like that."

No, I suppose not.

My uninvited guest doesn't sound totally convinced. I decide a change in subject is in order.

"How did you end up roping the man who was recently the most exalted general in all of Silana into helping you?" I ask, pausing by the built-in bookshelves. My fingers skim over the spines of historical treatises, military philosophy and strategy, and a few on equestrianism that I itch to pull out and flip through.

Stavros would probably consider that theft.

It wasn't that hard, Julita says in a familiar coy tone. He'd fallen from grace, and what better way to prove he can still defend the country than by routing out a bunch of scourge sorcerers who've already threatened the royal family?

And she felt comfortable walking up to him and pitching her case just like that?

Well, probably not just like that. It isn't hard to picture the woman whose image lingers ephemerally in my head slipping over to his side at some school event and making a few leading remarks.

Reeling him in around her finger the way Anya accused her of doing regularly.

I cock my head. "You wanted him on your side because he has the best chance of stopping the sorcerers once you figure out who they are?"

He has the king's trust and respect. When we're sure of the details, he'll ensure the problem is dealt with swiftly and effectively. She pauses with a short laugh. *And I did hope that having him around would make me a little safer, but obviously that benefit didn't extend outside our meetings.*

I lean against the edge of Stavros's desk, careful not to displace anything. "What about the others? How do they fit in?"

Oh, you should find all of them even easier to handle than Stavros. Benedikt's on the outskirts of the royal family, as I'm sure he'll tell you about sooner rather than later. He pretends he doesn't care, but he's still tempted by potential glory. And he's friendly with just about everyone in both the college and the palace, so he picks up a wide range of gossip.

"Alek is a scholar," I fill in. "You wanted someone who could access all the records and delve into research when necessary."

There, you're catching on quickly. Julita titters again. *Alek was an easy choice. He barely speaks to anyone, so he clearly got into the scholarship division based on actual work and not social influence. And he's insecure enough that it only took a little flattery for him to jump at the chance to help.*

My stomach twists at the way she speaks about the masked scholar's weaknesses. Would he be so concerned about her if he knew how she actually sees him?

Would any of them?

I swallow down my discomfort. They made their own decisions to get involved, just like I did.

"And the courtesan?"

Well, Cas can find out other kinds of gossip, the sorts of things his patrons might only babble about while they're feeling particularly... content. He's good at picking up on people's intentions—when they're lying and things like that. The companionship division is keen on attentiveness. And

he's so eager to please that he couldn't resist yet another way to do that.

“Quite the team you’ve assembled, then,” I mutter.

Before Julita can respond, a soft knock sounds on the door.

I freeze, unsure whether I should admit to being here. It’s obviously not Stavros—he wouldn’t have knocked.

Is anyone else supposed to know he has a new assistant yet?

I’m saved from that dilemma by an equally soft voice carrying through the thick wood. “Ivy, it’s just Casimir. I brought you a few things.”

My skin prickles as if my conversation with Julita might have somehow summoned him. What would *he* have brought me?

I push away from the desk. “Oh, er, all right. Come in.”

The courtesan breezes inside, swiftly but with a presence so warm it’s hard to feel wary. There’s a bundle of a few different colored fabrics in his arms, silk by the sheen of them.

Casimir flashes one of his bright smiles at me. “I know Stavros can get you equipped for the official work you’ll be doing as his assistant. I suspected he might neglect the *real* work, which is blending in during leisure time. That’s when people let down their guards.”

It is true that I’m unlikely to be invited into any conversations around the dining hall or strolling in the gardens while I’m dressed in fighting gear. And no noble lady could get away with wearing the exact same dress every day.

Casimir ambles over to the sofa and unfurls each of the gowns he brought over it in a row. Turquoise silk, then icy gray, then a forest green nearly the same shade as his eyes flow across the cushions like vibrant waterfalls.

The courtesan glances from the dresses to me and back again. “I think they should all fit well. The lacing gives some flexibility. As does...”

He reaches down and tugs at the skirts of the dresses, and my heart leaps eagerly. The folds of fabric overlap enough that you wouldn’t notice unless they’re yanked, but there’s a slit on either side, all the way up to my thighs.

When I take a step closer to confirm the others have it too, Casimir outright beams. “I figured you’d want easier access to your assorted weaponry.” His smile fades a moment later. “Especially considering what happened to Julita.”

I expect he’s a lot more concerned with preserving what’s left of the woman he adored than my personal wellbeing, but I’ll take it. “Thank you. Where did you even find these?”

“They’re not actually uncommon, even if they aren’t normally used for

concealing blades. They make it easier for riding astride. They each have a matching divided underskirt—like flowy trousers—that’ll cover your legs to your calves, but you can fix the weapons over that. I found designs with subtle pockets as well.”

Riding dresses. I should have thought of that.

Even better, because then it won’t matter if anyone *does* notice the slits.

“Thank you,” I murmur, fingering the sleeve of the turquoise dress. “If I’ve got to be in a gown, this is the kind I want.”

Casimir will be *very* good at his intended job if he can judge a woman’s preferences this well in every area.

I really should not be thinking about any other areas he might put his skills to. Even if he’s possibly the most beautiful man I’ve ever set eyes on. And the way he moves that sinewy body of his—

Mind out of the gutter, Ivy.

“Excellent,” Casimir says. “I’ll make sure Stavros puts in a request to have some finer underclothes sent up too. A lot of the women in this place might judge based on surface appearances, but they’ll judge every layer of that surface if they can.” His smile turns a bit sly.

I can’t restrain a snort. “I don’t doubt it.”

Perceptive, clever, and a solid sense of humor. I guess he mustn’t want for patrons.

But the comment about having Stavros handle the rest reminds me of something Julita told me. A prickle of concern passes through my gut. “Should you have come up here at all? I thought—Julita told me that the five of you act like you barely know each other in public.”

Casimir shrugs, showing no sign of fear himself. “I’m reasonably well-known in the companionship division. It wouldn’t be unusual for him to have asked my help outfitting his new assistant. Nothing any tongues would wag about.”

I let out a light chuckle. “Totally professional.” My head is already starting to ache taking in all the internal politics of this place.

He’s right, Julita offers. It should be safe enough. Just don’t approach any of the others around campus as if you know them at all well—except for Stavros, of course.

Naturally. Gods above, why couldn’t I have become Casimir’s assistant?

I mean, other than the fact that my “companionship” skills are about the direct inverse of my combat skills in effectiveness.

Casimir takes a step back as if he's going to go, but his gaze settles on my right hand. He lifts his chin toward it. "You have a gift. Is it anything that might be useful?"

I instinctively swipe my thumb over the stump where my pointer finger is missing its tip. The long-healed injury does look like it must have been a dedication ceremony sacrifice.

It was actually punishment for infringing a little too obviously on some asshole crime lord's territory when I was fourteen and getting a bit cocky. He'd have done a lot worse if there'd been much more than a few coins at stake.

It's easiest to go along with the misconception. It gives me the pretense of having dedicated myself at all.

"Probably a little," I say. "It helps me move quietly." Might as well pick a skill I already have in a totally non-magical way. I arch my eyebrows. "That's me, the sneaky thief all the way through."

I'm mocking Stavros and his barbed accusations, but Casimir's expression turns almost sad. "I'd imagine you're a lot more than that, Ivy. When I look at you and think of everything you've already risked to be here, I don't see sneakiness or deceit. I see kindness."

For the second time in this place, I find myself momentarily speechless. Casimir smoothly fills in the silence. "I'd better get going, since this is supposedly business and not a social call. I'm looking forward to hearing what you're able to discover when we meet in the archives next."

He pauses, and something in his gaze turns a bit more distant, as if he isn't really looking at me.

Because he's not.

"Of course you'd find a way to stick with us no matter what, Jules," he adds for the woman inside me, his voice gone a bit rough. "We'll see this through."

Then he slips out as swiftly as he arrived.

Dear, sweet man, Julita says in a droll tone that doesn't hold much admiration for the descriptors.

My hackles rise in unexpected defensiveness. I inhale slowly before letting myself respond.

"He obviously cared about you a lot. They all did."

She lets out a coy little chuckle. *I wasn't going to trust them to have my back while we took on a conspiracy of scourge sorcerers otherwise.*

The way she phrases it, as if their caring was part of her strategy rather than a natural development, niggles at me. But it's really none of my business how she handled her affairs.

I shift the dresses over to one end of the sofa and sit down. To my annoyance, I can't deny that the velvet cushions are about ten times as comfortable as my "bed" back in the cloth factory.

I won't exactly be hard done by even sleeping like an afterthought in the royal college.

I get up again, planning to make a thorough survey of the room while I'm alone. But my solitude only lasts long enough for me to confirm that, yes, most of the etched bottles in the liquor cabinet would have cost more than the people of the fringes make in an average month.

I'm just ambling back to the desk and its surrounding bookcases when Stavros strides into his quarters.

He takes in me and the dresses draped on the sofa in a quick glance. I leap to explain. "Casimir came by. He knew I'd need to blend in outside of the job too."

"Hmm," Stavros says, as if he isn't quite convinced that I didn't manage to steal three dresses in the short while he was gone. He drops his own bundle—this of linen, leather, and a clink that tells me there's chainmail in the mix—onto the cushions next to the gowns. "You're all set then."

I decide to let Casimir broach the topic of undergarments as promised. The former general has spent enough time thinking about my intimate apparel today.

He fishes in his pocket and draws out a bracelet a lot like Julita's, only plain gold without any gemstones. "This will give you your own access to the front gate and these chambers. I thought it'd be best if you weren't going around flashing Julita's."

"Good point." I take off Julita's bracelet to replace it with the new one and then pause, not sure where to put it.

Stavros eyes it for a moment. "What does she want done with it?"

I raise a questioning eyebrow, but Julita's presence is already stirring. *It's just a little scrap of gold. I suppose we should hold on to it in case we need it as evidence of some kind. Stavros should be able to keep it secure.*

I hold the delicate chain out to him. "She'd like you to put it someplace safe in case we need it later."

"Always thinking ahead," he says with a note of wry affection.

As he takes the bracelet from me, he motions to the two inner doors. “Keep out of my bedroom. We can share the latrine. If you want a bath, there’s a public room and a few private ones down the hall to your right.”

Of course. The elite of the central ward all have running water right into their homes, while the folk of the fringes make do with wells, chamber pots, and outhouses.

It’s hard to complain about that while I’m benefitting from the luxury, though.

I prop myself on the arm of the sofa. “So, what’s next? How do I get started on this grand quest I’ve stumbled into?”

Stavros aims a mild glower at me. “I’ve still got my staff meeting to attend. You can join me for my afternoon lessons and then spend some time getting to know the school. I’m sure a woman of your many talents can figure out the rest?”

I shrug. “Talk, listen, determine who the scourge sorcerers are. Fairly straight-forward.”

He guffaws. “Don’t we wish it were so. The wretches have proven awfully good at covering their tracks.”

I pause before picking up the thread he’s unknowingly offered me. “I guess this is your thing, isn’t it? Tackling evil sorcerers. I saw you before, a couple of years ago, at the execution of the riven sorcerer you apprehended.”

Stavros’s voice turns even drier. “Yes, it seems my true calling is to triumph against degenerate magic.”

I let my gaze wander across the room as if his response to my next remark doesn’t matter all that much to me. “Scourge sorcerers have got to be worse. At least the riven don’t pursue their power; it just happens.”

Even from the corner of my eye, I catch the stiffening of Stavros’s muscular frame. “It just happens, and then they drag the world into their madness with it. None of them are worth the dirt on their hides.”

At his vehemence, my gaze jerks back to him. “You take their existence pretty personally, it sounds like.”

He gives me a tight smile, anger smoldering in his eyes. I have the impression he isn’t seeing me at all in that moment. “A riven sorcerer butchered my best friend. I’ll be satisfied when all of them as well as anyone who’d dabble in scourge magic are wiped right off the face of the continent.”

Without another word, he heads out the door, with a thud of it shutting hard in his wake.

As I stare after him, Julita's voice mingles with my thoughts. *He isn't angry at you. It's only a bit of a sore spot for him.*

Yeah. A sore spot that also is me.

I swallow thickly. I've walked straight into even more danger than I bargained for.

TWELVE



I toss the cowhide figure into the heap with the others and swipe the back of my hand across my sweat-damp forehead. The pile of the lumpy but vaguely human-shaped things looks increasingly unsettling the higher I build it in the military division's storage room.

You might think that nobles would reserve the grotesque thought of having to deal with limp bodies for scenarios that specifically require them. But no, the powers that be—or, at least, the resident former general—seem to have decided they may as well be multipurpose. Anytime a training exercise requires obstacles, drag out the leather corpses!

That's the last of them. I march back out to the field and find Stavros presiding over several lingering students aiming for extra recognition. I guess one good word from the former general could see them launching their military careers several rungs up the ladder.

“—been so long,” one of the women is saying. “Do we really need to worry about the empire after all this time?”

Stavros rubs his hands together, the hooked metal one he wears for lessons in the field glinting against the flesh one in its leather glove. His gaze slides from the questioner across the faces of the others.

I've noticed that during class, he rarely rests his eyes anywhere for more than a couple of seconds. He shifts his attention so smoothly I doubt anyone would notice if they weren't watching for it, but I suspect it's to cover the faulty vision Julita mentioned to me.

He speaks in a wryly confident tone that's a little warmer than any he's directed at me. “Darium still exists, doesn't it? Last I checked, they continued

to hold Cotea in their grip, just across the channel from us?”

A man off to the side raises his shoulders in a shrug. “We’ve always pushed them back, though.”

“Yes, because we’re there and trained in both tactics and combat well enough to do it.” Stavros tips his head in acknowledgment. “You all know that Darium’s forces conquered the continent by taking advantage of the wreckage after the Great Retribution. They recovered quickly and overwhelmed the rest of us before we were in a state to fight back. It’s a far greater challenge for them now, but only a fool believes they’re impervious. The late King Melchior won Silana’s freedom several decades ago, and yet Darium has never gone more than a year or two without harassing our borders in an attempt to regain ground.”

His mention of the Great Retribution chills me. If the scourge sorcerers keep up their sick experiments, they could set us up for full-out war on top of divine punishment.

The students in front of Stavros will serve as officers, with the best mounts and equipment and the ability to make decisions. It’s the common people who’d be summoned to bear the worst of the blows on the front lines.

The man who shrugged makes a slight scoffing sound. “Several decades, and they’ve gotten nowhere.”

“Ah, but you never know when a new advisor or emperor might come along with the right insight to shake things up. And if you get careless with your defenses...”

Stavros lunges forward in an instant, flicking his foot around the guy’s ankle at just the right angle to send him toppling over. Before the student lands on his ass, the former general grabs his hand and helps right him with a light pat of his prosthetic.

The other students laugh, and the guy who became a demonstration does too. Somehow the man who’s such an asshole to me manages to maintain both authority and good will with the younger nobles.

I’d bite my tongue off before I’d admit it out loud, but he’s good at what he’s doing here.

Stavros sends them off with a wave of his hand. As they offer their brisk salutes of respect, I amble over to him.

When he turns to face me, a quiver runs through my nerves despite my best attempt at matching his effortless cool. The memory of his vindictive expression when he spoke of the riven simmers amid my thoughts.

I can't let him see my anxiety. I force a sardonic smile onto my face and tilt my head toward the storage room. "You know, if all you wanted your assistant to do was cart equipment around, you could have hired a mule."

A hint of his annoyingly cocky grin curls his mouth. "Maybe I did. Are you itching to get in on more action?"

I fold my arms over my chest. "I'm just puzzled about why you made such a fuss about my fighting ability if the closest I'm going to come to even fake battles is wrestling with stuffed leather."

Yesterday afternoon, I propped up the cowhide figures on stands so Stavros could lecture the junior students on the best points to hit with their fake swords from which positions. This morning, I stacked them into piles of three to five, and then Stavros had some of his senior students—the ones I guess he feels have the most promise for higher command—set a bunch of other junior students maneuvering around them all across the field.

I haven't had a hilt in my hand once since he agreed to bring me on. Possibly I am a little disappointed.

I definitely haven't learned anything from the students, who are too busy fawning over their professor and looking down their noses at my laboring to consider having a conversation with me.

Stavros shrugs. "We've only just gotten started. Who knows what fantastic uses I'll find for you yet, Thief."

Julita lets out a long-suffering sigh, as if she's the one he's mocking. *I'm sorry. He isn't normally quite this much of an ass.*

A smile of my own touches my lips. "Julita thinks you should stop being such a prick." Which isn't quite what she said, but the sentiment was implied.

Stavros's face does strange things when he's reminded about the woman I'm hosting. He arches his eyebrows, but at the same time his jaw tightens.

He keeps his tone nonchalant. "And how do I know you're not just making that up?"

Because he's much better company when he's crooning Veldunian serenades.

The corner of my mouth quirks higher. "She suggests you should do some serenading instead. Apparently you know some Veldunian songs?"

I get an even more interesting expression in answer to the light jab. Stavros's dark eyes flare, both amused and dangerous. "It was only the one time, and—"

He cuts himself off just before he prods my shoulder in a gesture that

might have been playful. If he hadn't remembered at the last second that he's talking to more than just the woman he shares that memory with.

In that glimpse, I can almost imagine a Stavros who isn't an asshole. Then he glowers at me as if it's my fault he slipped up.

The chances he'd ever really joke around with me appear to be approximately nil. I think I'll survive *that* disappointment.

Instead, his voice turns a bit gruff. "Why don't you get on with taking down the wretches you were so eager to destroy, hmm?"

Without waiting for my response, he turns on his heel and strides off to do some former-general-y thing I'm clearly not invited to.

As the distance between us grows, I exhale some of my tension. He has no idea about my power, and I can keep it that way.

I've managed not to give in to my magic's call in nearly seven years. I'm the one in charge here.

I glance around the courtyard. A few clusters of students between classes are lounging on the stretch of lawn between the Domi and the Quadring, but none of them look particularly eager to have a stranger crash their conversations.

Maybe I need a better idea of how the investigation started before I can continue it.

I keep my voice low, moving my lips as little as possible. "Could you walk me through what you saw, and where, on the day the sorcerers made their attempt on the prince's life?"

If you think it could help. They were touring some of the classrooms in the Quadring—the queen and both Princess Klaudia and Prince Jacos. Take that entrance to your right.

I cross the field to one of the less prominent doorways and then walk through the halls at Julita's direction.

I was here, she says, bringing me to a halt a few doors down from one of the exits to the outer courtyard. They were saying their last farewells before taking their leave. A crowd of us from the classes that'd just been let out were watching them go. And I heard someone muttering—there were these odd words that my brother and Wendos would use. I'm not sure where they came across them.

The hall is currently empty, everyone shut away in their classrooms. "Words to go with the scourge sorcery rituals?" I whisper.

Exactly. I couldn't make out the murmur all that well—it was only a

couple of words amid a lot of chatter... And the hall was so packed, I couldn't see who'd spoken. It unnerved me, but I thought I might have misheard it. Except that night, the prince came down ill.

"Could it have been a coincidence?"

I suppose. But after I spoke to Stavros, he reached out to people he knows on the Crown's Watch who guard the palace. The symptoms were unusual and severe enough that they had the palace searched for possible intruders who might have poisoned the prince. It wasn't a simple flu.

I drift back toward the stairwell. "And you've seen specific signs of rituals—where?"

There's the dartling eggshell—they get it powdered and burn it. It has a very distinctive scent. One time when I was on a hunt in the campus woods, I caught a whiff of it and followed it, and found a few traces on some tree roots in a clearing. There's no other reason for anyone to be smearing that around.

"Anything else?"

One other time in the woods before that, I came across a tree that'd been marked with the sigil of the All-Giver, inverted. Julita shudders. Borys liked to draw that too, as if it'd encourage more power to flow down into him.

I frown as I tramp down the stairs. "And that wasn't enough proof?"

Most of the records around scourge sorcery have been destroyed to try to prevent anyone from following their footsteps. Alek hasn't been able to find any accounts that mention the inverted sigil. And recognizing the words and the dartling egg smell is just my experience, not something anyone can confirm.

Which is why we need more proof. I worry at my lower lip for a moment before catching myself.

The palace bell begins its hourly ring, and Julita perks up. *Speaking of hunts, it's almost time for the weekly practice hunt the leadership division holds. They'll let an interested assistant tag along. There are a couple of regulars I've been keeping an eye on. And everyone does plenty of talking.*

I don't know what a practice hunt is, but I'm all for finding it out if it means making some progress toward completing this mission. "Sounds good. Where's that?"

Ah, I think you should probably get changed first.

I glance down at my combat leathers, which have seen exactly zero combat while on my body. She may have a point.

At the next bell, after changing into one of the riding dresses Casimir

provided and pinning my hair into one of the loopy updos that the noble ladies seem to favor, I head over to the stable. If it seems as odd to Julita as it does to me to get dressed up to hang out with horses, she doesn't give any indication.

I think this is the best one, she remarks as I smooth my hands over the subtly pleated silk. *It makes your eyes look even more blue.*

It's the turquoise dress, which I think is my favorite too. The cut is simple in its elegance, with only a little gold embroidery, no beading or elaborate swirls, decorating the neck- and waistline.

And I've discovered that the folds on this one allow me to conceal one extra dagger compared to the others. Which is the most important factor, naturally.

Even if I have three dresses, I could get away with wearing this one more than the others, right? After all, I'm supposed to be a mere country noble no one's ever heard of before.

I mean, while I *have* to be wearing fancy dresses at all.

My nerves twitch as I spot the twenty or so noblemen and ladies gathered outside the stable, but the familiar smells take the edge off my anxiety. Fresh hay and old wood and that distinct musky-sweet horsey smell that I welcomed into my lungs whenever I slipped out to my family's much smaller stable to groom Dotty, our mare.

There could be one or two things I'd actually like about the Sovereign College. If they didn't always come with a pack of rich snobs on the side.

As I stroll along the pathway with the smooth but not too swift strides that befit a lady, I pick out several familiar faces in the waiting group. There's Anya, who will never recover her missing earrings and whose flaxen locks currently look more like a sculpture than a hairdo. And Esmæ, Julita's petite dormmate with the eye patch who came to my rescue.

The others, I haven't had time to commit their names to memory yet, but I know I've crossed paths with them while walking the halls or perhaps in the dining hall this morning.

Oh, and Benedikt is with them—his golden hair catching the sunlight off to the side of the small crowd. He's laughing with a few of the other men.

I jerk my gaze away. I'm not supposed to know him.

But he's going to witness one of my first real attempts at noble subterfuge. All of which I'd imagine he'll report back to Stavros—and Casimir and Alek—one way or another.

Wonderful.

Julita pipes up, falling into a hush as if there's any chance of someone overhearing. *The girl with the red streak in her hair—keep a particular eye on her. Wendos had a thing going with her for a few months. And I've seen him act very friendly with the short fellow there in the dark blue tunic, so watch him carefully too.*

I want to point out that I'm not sure how much those associations matter when we haven't even proven that Wendos himself is still interested in scourge sorcery, but I'm too close to the other students to talk to Julita without looking insane.

Anya is standing with a couple of similarly haughty women. Her eyes narrow when she notices me arriving. "Julita's friend. What are you doing here again?"

I offer my best ingratiating smile and stick to an appropriately refined tone. "I happened to stumble into a conversation with one of the professors whose father was close colleagues with mine, and it turned out he was in need of an assistant. My family decided they could spare me for the opportunity."

One of Anya's friends lets out a laugh too short to be good-humored. "How intriguing. And you know Julita as well?"

I've prepared for this moment, knowing I'd likely run into someone who'd heard my initial story.

It's fine—possibly even a good thing—if the conspirators find out I supposedly knew Julita. Their reactions to me could give their guilt away.

But I don't want anyone believing that I was involved in whatever investigations they believed Julita was carrying out. That could be a faster death sentence than showing off my riven magic for Stavros.

"I suppose I *knew* her," I say with a slight grimace. "We hadn't seen each other in years. From what I've heard since arriving here, she'd changed quite a bit. I don't even know where she's wandered off to—she didn't bother telling me that much."

Anya hums to herself with a brief primp of her hair. I take a surreptitious glance toward the two classmates Julita pointed out to me, but I can't see any change in their expressions if they noted me talking about her.

If they're worried about anyone investigating her disappearance, they're doing a good job of hiding it.

My gaze snags on another female student in a deep burgundy dress that

compliments her olive-brown skin. Unlike the rest of us, her straight black hair is only pulled back from her face in a gold clip but otherwise allowed to tumble down her back. Even Esmae has her hair coiled into a bun for the outing.

The woman is standing at the edge of the group like many others, but something about her stance gives the sense that she's more apart from us. Like there's a short distance there she isn't sure how to cross.

As I watch, she fidgets with the folds of her skirt. Her right hand is missing its smallest two fingers—the flesh smoothed over in the way of a typical dedication sacrifice.

I don't even need to twitch my eyebrow for Julita to pick up on my curiosity. *That's Petra. She's pretty quiet, mostly keeps to herself. Apparently she's a niece twice removed of the queen's family, or something like that. I don't think it's likely she attacked her own cousin.*

Maybe not, but I'm not ruling anyone out just yet.

I smooth the skirt of my own dress and am about to push the conversation onward when a broad-shouldered, middle-aged woman with a face as pasty as a dumpling steps forward. She claps her hands. "All right, everyone. Select your steeds."

Accidentally-on-purpose, I head through the stable entrance just behind Anya and her friends. Which gives me the opening to keep talking after all.

"It's strange that Julita hasn't been around for so long, isn't it? Where could she have gone? Did it seem as if she'd been getting into anything... unsavory?"

The girl at Anya's right scoffs.

Anya simply lifts her nose. "I can't imagine Julita getting her hands particularly dirty."

The girl who asked me about knowing Julita giggles. "No, if she wanted something unsavory done, she'd just wheedle someone else into doing it."

I slant my mouth into a frown. "I hope she didn't cause any resentments, then?"

"Oh, people generally don't get *angry* with Julita," Anya says in a bored tone. "She's just ever so charming."

She doesn't say it like a compliment.

Before I can prod further, she motions toward the end of the row of stalls we've reached. "You should take Toast out. Stall 16. He's the perfect horse for you to start with."

If the cold glint in her eyes wasn't enough to tip me off, Julita makes a sound of consternation. *Toast is a gods-damned terror. She's trying to make a fool out of you... or worse.*

It seems to me I'll look more like a fool if I act frightened by the suggestion. I can't imagine a horse kept in the royal college's stables could be *that* wild.

A terror to noblewomen could still be a piece of cake to someone who appreciates a little spirit.

I shoot Anya a quick smile. "Thank you for the suggestion."

A titter ripples between the three women as I head toward the stall she indicated. Footsteps rap against the stone floor after me.

I recognize Esmæ's clear voice. "Anya's just joking, Ivy. I can help you find a better mount."

"Oh, Esmæ, don't be a spoilsport," one of Anya's friends mutters.

I glance over my shoulder. "Thank you, but I'll be fine. Now I'm even more curious about this horse."

Stopping in front of the stall, I find myself faced with a stallion whose dun hair holds a sprinkling of darker brown to match his mane. He's got the coloring of a piece of toasted bread. Nothing particularly terrifying about that.

I reach over the low stall door slowly to give him a chance to sniff my hand. He gives a snort and a restless stomp of his hooves. He is a little testy.

The stable hands have already suited him up with saddle and bridle like they must have all the horses on offer for the hunt. All I've got to do is get on him.

I make a soft clucking sound under my breath as I ease into the stall, the way I have before when I've gotten the chance to commune with an unfamiliar horse. I haven't *ridden* any horses since Dotty, but I know my way around them.

I've missed her. Being in a stable feels like coming home—to the one part of my old home I have nothing but fond memories of.

An unbidden heat pricks at the back of my eyes. I grimace against it.

I'm not really any more alone here than I was on the streets. But there I was surrounded by people with concerns I could relate to, whose lives I wanted to take some small part in.

I've never really been able to count on anyone except myself... but I *feel* that fact more in this place than I ever have before.

Toast stomps again. I pat his neck reassuringly and inhale the horsey smell, letting it soothe my brief spell of melancholy.

Benedikt's breezy voice filters from the boards at the back of my stall from the one adjacent, low so no one farther away will hear. "You do like to live dangerously, huh, Knives?"

Knives? Is that what he's going to be calling me now?

I guess I can think of less fitting nicknames.

"I seem to have a knack for it," I retort in a similarly low tone. "I didn't know hunting was your thing."

He hasn't really struck me as the aggressive type.

Benedikt chuckles. "When you're a bastard's bastard, all things can be your thing."

My head swivels toward the back wall. "Pardon?"

Here we go, Julita remarks with amusement.

"I'm the bastard son of a royal bastard," Benedikt says, sounding no less amused himself. "Part of the family but definitely not. It's a very unique position—a certain amount of recognition with none of the responsibility. I try to make the most of it."

Julita fills in one of the blanks in that story. *Benny's father is King Konram's half-brother... who apparently picked up his father's tastes for stepping outside his marriage.*

That's how Benedikt has connections in the palace. It doesn't sound as if the situation bothers him.

Questions itch at me, but the hunt master hollers from outside the stables for us to get a move on. I grip Toast's reins and push open the stall door.

THIRTEEN



The stallion follows me down the aisle, shaking his head and swishing his tail. At the sight of the outer yard, he leaps forward.

The reins dig into my fingers with the effort to hold him with me. “Whoa, there,” I murmur.

Other students are leading out their horses around us. I guide Toast farther away from the stable so we’re not too close to anyone else. Then I grip the pommel and back of the saddle, set my foot in the stirrup, and heft my other leg over.

Before I’ve quite landed on the leather surface, Toast kicks up his back legs. I jolt forward, just barely catching my balance by clutching the pommel and his mane.

A nervous sweat breaks over my skin. Dotty showed some attitude from time to time, but she never did anything like that.

Julita sighs. *You know how he got his name? Because the trainer said anyone who rides him without knowing what they’re doing is toast.*

I grit my teeth. I do know what I’m doing, and I’m not going to let a few stuck-up nobles mock me into fleeing from the challenge.

Even if my heart is now thumping faster than before with the knowledge of just how big a challenge it might be.

I gather the reins and keep a firm but not aggressive hold on them as I nudge my heels against the stallion’s sides. He whirls around and nearly bolts off across the field before I rein him in.

The muscles in my arms strain with the toss of his mane.

Anya shoots me a coy smirk from the back of the mild-mannered gelding

she's perched on. "I hope he doesn't give you too much trouble."

"Oh, we're getting along perfectly well," I say, pretending my palms aren't sweating from the effort.

When I manage to keep Toast standing relatively still for a minute, my confidence begins to recover. Then the dumpling-faced hunt master weaves between the horses with a couple of helpers, handing out... bows.

I can't help staring as even Anya slings one over her head and touches the quiver of small arrows that's been fixed to her saddle. Somehow I hadn't quite processed that the hunt required all of us to actually... hunt.

It's all right, Julita says. We don't kill anything. Just take our aim at the conjured targets and see who can hit them best.

The other students are chattering with each other enough that I risk murmuring, "I'm not sure I'll hit anything at all."

Haven't you ever used a bow?

I give my head a subtle shake. The woman and her helpers reach me, and I force myself to grasp the reins with just one hand while I accept the curved wooden weapon.

I'm a knife person. A bow isn't going to do much for you on the streets of the fringes, and I sure as shit can't hide one under my tunic.

I get the impression Julita winces. *Well, we're not here to impress them with your fantastic archery skills. I'll coach you as well as I can. Mostly focus on staying on that beast of a horse.*

Toast has definitely noticed that my attention has become divided. He scuffs his hooves impatiently against the ground until I give his reins a light tug so he knows I'm staying on top of him. My mouth has gone dry.

I have to learn archery on horseback while handling a horse who'd like nothing more than to get me off his back. This should be fun.

Across the stable yard, one of the mounted noblemen yelps. As my head jerks toward him, his horse rears and shudders.

"Daimon," someone near me mutters like a curse.

The rambling spirit-creature isn't satisfied with a brief disruption like the one that provoked the charm merchant's gelding. The rider yanks at the reins and shouts out, but the horse keeps bucking and heaving as if it's afraid to let its hooves touch the ground.

While the nearest students draw their own mounts back, the hunt master rushes over. Before she can reach the frantic horse, it flings its haunches so forcefully its rider careens right out of the saddle.

And under the next fall of its stomping hooves.

Bone cracks. The man cries out, reaching toward his leg that's now bent at an unnatural angle.

The dumpling-faced woman catches the reins. "Get a medic!" she hollers at one of the helpers.

The horse has settled down, as if the spirit that was harassing it slipped away as soon as it'd done some real damage. Which, given what I've seen and heard about how the daimon are behaving at the college, might be the case.

Unbidden, my eyes seek out Benedikt. He meets my gaze just for a second, his usual smirk gone tight.

This obviously isn't a typical incident.

"Blasted spirits," someone mutters, and someone else hisses at them to keep quiet as if they're worried the daimon might come at us all.

Several of the students graze their foreheads, chests, and gut with the three-fingered tap of the gesture of the divinities.

They might not be wrong to worry. The minor divine beings of this place appear to be plenty pissed off and perfectly willing to take it out on us.

The hunt master has knelt beside the injured student. She lifts her head and swings her arm at the rest of us. "He doesn't need an audience. Go on. You know what to do."

Er. That's debatable.

Nevertheless, I direct Toast to the right, following the train of horses setting off toward the stretch of woods at the back of the school.

Lovely. I'm going to be hunting on horseback with a bow and arrow while there are also trees in the way.

What's next—the teachers set the trees on fire?

Toast huffs and does his best to spring ahead or veer off in a detour, but my firm grip keeps him reasonably in line. Anya glances back at me, and I find her frown immensely gratifying.

At least for the few seconds before Toast decides to take a page out of the other horse's book and get a good rear in.

My ass slams into the back of the saddle and nearly slides right off. I bite my lip and snatch at his mane.

"Down," I order him. "You want to move, then let's move."

Rather than trying to rein him in, I tap my heels to send the stallion trotting forward. He huffs another breath, sounding more confused than

irritated now, and lopes past a few of the other horses before slowing down of his own accord.

Da always told me the easiest way to work with a horse was to show you respected it—that you'd give it room to tell you what it wanted too. Back when he still talked to me enough to offer any kind of lessons.

It seems he was right.

As soon as we've urged our horses down the winding path into the stretch of forest, I see what Julita meant about the conjured targets. Here and there, glowing shapes flicker into view amid the branches and on the forest floor. Some look like ghostly animals, others like random blobs of light.

One arrow flies, and another, and another. Around me, the students are claiming their hits like escalating bets in a card game.

Keeping a careful watch on my steed, I ease my bow off my shoulder.

Set the base of the arrow against the string, Julita says. And rest the side of the shaft near the head at the middle of the curve in the bow. Pull back as hard as you can and sight down the shaft.

Easier said than done.

My first arrow falls off into the brush. The second zings into a tree at least a few feet from the target I was aiming at.

At this rate, I'm more likely to hit one of my fellow students than any magical shapes.

I restrain a grimace. At least Toast is playing mostly nice for now, though I have to grab the reins once to slow him when he tests me.

Esmæ comes up behind me, the scattered sunlight glancing off her pale face and the mauve patch over her one eye. "I suppose you haven't done much horseback shooting before."

"No," I say, because it's obvious, and don't bother to mention that I haven't done any shooting with my feet on the ground either.

"It took me a while to get the hang of it." She motions for me to watch her. "You'll have an easier time if you keep your elbow higher. And pull back just a little more, right before you release the arrow."

I give her instructions my best attempt, and my next arrow flies only a foot away from the luminescent deer head I spotted through the trees.

Oh, well, I'm not here to become an expert archer anyway.

I wet my lips and notch another arrow. "Thanks for your help. You're rooming in the same dorm as Julita—do you know her well?"

I already know from Julita that they weren't close, but it seems like the

sort of thing a person would ask of a stranger who's randomly helping them. All Esmæ knows about me is that I knew Julita.

Esmæ cocks her head as if considering the question. "Not exactly. But she's the kind of person you can't help noticing. She's always... Having her around keeps me working hard to impress the teachers just as much as she does."

Hmm, Julita says. She makes me sound like a bootlicker. I didn't ply for their favor that much.

I open my mouth, forming my next question, and a sharp voice carries from farther behind me. "So, Ivy of Nikodi, you landed that assistantship with Ster. Stavros right out from under the rest of us."

I peer over my shoulder and make out the speaker in the shifting forest shadows just beyond Esmæ. The tall, athletic woman whose name I don't know holds her bow like it's part of her body.

Julita supplies her name. *Romild. Her province is on the border—vulnerable to military incursions.*

So maybe she was hoping that getting close with Stavros would mean more protection from the royal forces.

I can't blame her for that, but I can't give her the position either.

"The timing happened to be right," I say. There isn't much else I can mention to justify it.

Romild snorts. "And you can barely manage to hit thin air. Exactly how many other ways did you please him to make up his mind?"

Her insinuation couldn't be clearer from her tone. My jaw tightens against a flicker of anger.

As if I'd ever lower myself to "pleasing" any man, let alone a jerk like Stavros, to get their good will.

I manage to keep my tone calm. "There's more to military skill than archery."

She guffaws. "You keep telling yourself that. We'll see how long it takes before he *can't* justify keeping you on. There are a lot of us who'd want the chance to work with a legend like him."

I don't see how any good can come from debating the subject further. I clamp my mouth shut and ignore the squirming of magic inside me that wants to teach my accuser a thing or two about combat.

But it doesn't seem wise to let her comments go completely unchallenged among all these witnesses. If I want my noble schoolmates to treat me as

more than dirt, I have to prove I can give as good as I get.

I direct Toast to slow between the next couple of targets so that we fall back in the procession. With my bow temporarily slung over my shoulder again, I let my hand slide over my parted skirt and my fingers hook around a small hilt in a sheath fixed to my thigh.

I might be playing noble, but I earned my unrequested title as the Hand of Kosmel.

Romild nudges her steed past me with a fierce flash of her eyes. I nod respectfully—and flick out my hand between us right as she passes.

Her horse makes it a few more steps before her saddle sways to the side. My knife is already tucked back in its hiding place.

Romild lets out a strangled noise and gropes for the horse's mane, but it's too late. The saddle with its split girth slides right down the horse's side, and she tumbles to the forest floor with an audible *oomph*.

As she scrambles to her feet, I hum to myself. "Perhaps General Stavros prefers an assistant who knows how to stay on her horse."

Several of the other students have stopped to watch. No one can prove I actually did anything, so no one makes an accusation.

But they all know the accident probably wasn't a coincidence.

Benedikt's gaze rests on me with apparent delight. The other expressions aimed at me look newly wary... with both respect and hostility.

I send Toast trotting past her again, and Romild tracks me with furious eyes. My magic wriggles between my ribs again—wanting to shield myself, wanting to heave her away—and I tense against it.

She's only a minor threat. Nothing that should bother me much.

Except the next second, an all-too-familiar agony spikes out from my sternum. I clamp my teeth hard against a gasp of pain.

Gods smite me, what *now*? An incident that small has never set off my power's full backlash before.

But it definitely is today. The pain burns through my organs, and my hands shake where I'm clutching the reins.

Ivy? Julita says tentatively, but I can't say anything to reassure her right now.

Toast sidesteps beneath me. A quiver runs through his frame.

The stallion can sense that something's off with his rider. If I'm not careful, I'm going to end up tumbling off too.

I can't let anyone else see what I'm grappling with. I can't let them

suspect there's anything wrong with me.

And I have to stay on this cursed horse.

I focus on the thud of his hooves against the forest floor. I flex my thigh muscles against his sides, assuring him that I'm still here. I rock the reins in a gentle rhythm.

My awareness of the stallion's presence, the flow of his life with his breaths and his own thumping heart, helps me tune out the wrenching sensation inside me. With a few more breaths, the throbbing subsides.

My back feels drenched in sweat. I hold it straight as I gather myself to make another attempt with the blasted bow.

I'm okay. I made it through—I made it through all of it.

But how much longer can I keep that up if the cracks in my soul are widening?

FOURTEEN



As I pass the tapestry that shows Signy facing the emperor's army, I can't help shooting her exalted figure a wistful glance. Conquering grave wrongs must be a damned sight easier when you've got the full host of godlen gazing down on you with their blessings.

Of course, I'm not sure we'd want to alert our divine overseers to the trouble we're facing right now. Who's to say they'd help us in our quest rather than decide the scourge sorcerers have already gone too far and it's time to rain down godly retribution?

As I reach for the sconce, I drop my voice to a murmur. "Are you sure he'll be down there now? And he won't mind me showing up an hour early?"

Julita laughs. *Alek would live his whole life in the archives if he could get away with it. I often arrived early to get a more detailed account of the latest discoveries he unearthed.*

That answer doesn't exactly answer my second question, because I'm not Julita. But maybe she can't conceive of the encounter going differently than it would have for her.

The shadowy passage opens, and I step into it and down the stairs.

The questions I have for Alek aren't ones I want to ask in front of the other men, especially under Stavros's suspicious gaze. When I mentioned to Julita that there was something I'd like to discuss with him before bringing it to the main group, she encouraged me to arrive at the next meeting of our little cabal before it officially started.

The masked scholar has acted awfully wary of me himself, as much as he might want to preserve Julita's presence. But he's clearly the one to ask about

archaic knowledge that wouldn't have come up in Stavros's military training or the gossip of patrons and classmates.

If the scholar can point me to the information I need, it'll be worth any awkwardness that comes from imposing on him.

It'll be easier if I know more about him—to avoid sticking my foot in my mouth.

As I descend through the darkness, I pitch my voice even lower. “What's the story with his mask? Why does he wear it?”

Julita makes a pensive sound. *I've never seen him without it. It's not the sort of thing it's polite to pry about, but I gather that he's hiding some sort of ugliness about his face—a deformity or a scar or the like.* She lets out another light laugh. *So obsessed with facts and knowledge and yet so concerned about appearances too.*

My skin itches at the slight mocking edge to her tone. If Alek is hiding some unfortunate feature, I can't help thinking it's at least as much about his fellow students' concerns about appearances as about his own.

Having experienced the attitudes around here, I can't say I'd blame him for wanting whatever kind of shield he can get against their judgments.

I can't ask anything else, because with my next step, I slip from the magical passage into the room. My formal slippers rasp against the stone floor, and Alek startles where he was bowed over a thick book at the desk.

When he sees it's me, his stance goes even more stiff. He swipes at his thick black hair and pins me with the piercing gaze that's turned totally cold again. “What are you doing down here? We're not due to meet for another hour.”

I splay my hands in an apologetic gesture. “I know. I'm sorry to interrupt. I had a possibility I wanted to pursue before I'm sure it's worth bringing up with everyone, something I thought might have come up in your research. Julita said you're often down here ahead of time.”

The set of Alek's mouth softens at the mention of Julita. His bright brown eyes flick downward and then back up to meet mine again with a different sort of intensity. “Is she... okay? I mean, as much as a person could be, when...”

He makes a vague gesture to encompass the ridiculous situation she and I have found ourselves in.

Even though I don't really know this man, even though he probably considers me as much of a street rat as Stavros does, the question brings a

lump into my throat.

He might be a haughty noble like the rest of them, but he's still human.

And I know what it's like to lose someone you care about.

"She seems to be doing all right, considering," I say lightly. "She definitely has plenty to contribute. What do you think, Julita? How are you holding up?"

Well, I'd obviously prefer not being dead, but you do keep things interesting. I'd rather be stuck with you than some vapid priss like Anya.

My lips quirk into a crooked smile. "She finds me an entertaining host."

Alek blinks and then gives himself a bit of a shake as if gathering his thoughts. "It wouldn't do for her to be bored, I suppose. What's the possibility you wanted to look into?"

I have to tread carefully here, making sure that my reasoning sounds logical even though it's not the real reason I'm asking. "I was wondering about methods of magical suppression. If there are any records or stories of procedures or materials that might dampen unearthly power. Maybe there's some way we could make it more difficult for the sorcerers to carry out their evil intent while we're working on proving who they are."

Alek rubs his bronze-brown jaw, his gaze going distant. "Magical suppression. With the riven sorcerers, the authorities rely on general sedatives to ensure they can't work their powers, but we can hardly have the entire college in a stupor."

I manage to stop my smile from tightening. "Obviously. I was hoping there might be a subtler method we could try."

Or at least, that *I* could try, to get a better grip on the power writhing inside me. After yesterday's fit of agony over a simple glare, tamping it down feels significantly more urgent than ever before.

The authorities haven't found any method that would remove the threat of a riven sorcerer's power completely while leaving them reasonably conscious, but I'll settle for taking the edge off if I can get that much.

"There is something that might be relevant, though I can't remember how much detail the records include..." Alek moves toward the door set between two of the many shelves and then hesitates. His body tenses for a moment before he glances my way.

"You may as well come too. We'll be looking for books on pre-empire history, but the organization down here isn't ideal."

I follow him through the door into another archive room, this one at least

three times as large as the one we left. Bookcases and open shelving units stretch out in every direction, stacked with leather- and canvas-bound volumes, sheafs of unbound paper, and wax-sealed scrolls. Even the settee squatting amid the maze has several books scattered across its faded cushions.

My jaw goes a bit slack, taking it all in. The tang of ancient ink and paper floods my lungs, almost as comforting as stable scents.

I suppress the urge to embrace one of the rows of books and gulp the smell down even more fully. “Wow. And this is what the scholar division *doesn't* think is important enough to keep in the main library?”

Alek watches my reaction with an expression that might be bemused, though it's hard to tell with so much of his face hidden behind the mask. “We've accumulated a lot of texts over the centuries. Some of the collection is prioritized based on our current academic focus. When it comes to historical events, the royal family prefers that students concentrate on the period starting with the overthrowing of the empire.”

I restrain a snort. “Let us not dwell on our failures, only our victories. Somehow I'm not surprised.”

I take a few steps along one of the shelves, trailing my fingers over the spines of the books. Only a light sprinkling of dust scatters their covers, suggesting that this room is accessed fairly often—or the scholarship division makes a point of regularly cleaning their archives.

Alek strides on ahead of me, scanning the books with a stricter air. “I checked every account I can find of the gifts of the current students—and staff. There are several Jurnus dedicats in the leadership division and a couple in companionship with weather-associated magic, but mostly along the lines of summoning rain or ensuring a sunny day rather than anything to do with wind.”

I frown. “I suppose we should look into their recent activities anyway.”

He nods. “I've already begun. So far it appears most if not all of them were on the campus at the time of Julita's murder, but I'll ask Benedikt and Casimir to see what they can find out about those who didn't have classes.”

He's certainly thorough in his work—I'll give him that.

I glance back at the shelf, and my hand stalls on a line of familiar embossed type. I yank out the slim volume. “The first book of Gisela Luvinya's *Traveling Diaries*. I've never been able to find it.”

Alek's tone turns skeptical. “How do you even know about it, then?”

“Oh, I found the second buried in the stash where I ended up staying... before I became a fake noble. She’s constantly referencing previous adventures but only in the vaguest terms that just make you want the damn book more.”

Alek shrugs. “I suppose you could borrow it. I doubt it’d be missed any time soon.”

“Really?” I press the book to my chest instinctively, as if afraid he’ll change his mind and wrench it away. Which is silly, because we both have more important things to worry about than fifty-year-old travelogues.

A hint of a smile touches Alek’s stern face. “It might as well be appreciated by someone.”

He pauses. “How is it you learned to read well at all? I was under the impression letters weren’t widely taught in the outer wards, beyond the basics.”

My delight at finding the book fades. The less I talk about where I came from, the better for both of us.

“My parents were readers,” I say briskly. “They saw that we—that I could follow in their footsteps.”

Until they no longer wanted me to. But by then I had enough to continue my education on my own.

Alek’s eyes have narrowed. “And what did your parents do that *they* learned to read?”

My stomach knots. “I don’t see how their occupations are relevant to our mission.”

The scholar turns to fully face me, his jaw clenching. “You’re expecting us to trust you with—with *everything*. Even with Julita’s soul. Why wouldn’t we want to know exactly who we’re dealing with?”

I refrain from saying that I’d happily hand over Julita’s soul to any of them given the choice. My voice comes out tart all the same. “I am not my parents.” As they made amply clear hundreds of times over. “And it seems to me that *I’m* the one who’s risking far more here with people I have only a ghost’s word that I can trust. You already know more about me than I do about you!”

Alek opens his mouth and closes it again. I can’t decipher what’s going on behind his penetrating gaze.

Julita gives a soft laugh. *That set him straight.*

Then he lifts his chin just slightly. “What do you want to know?”

I hadn't actually expected him to offer himself up for examination. I hesitate, and one obvious question pops into my head. "What's your gift?"

"What makes you assume I have one?"

I stare at him for a second. Asking for at least a small dedication gift is par for the course among nobles.

They can afford to lose a little of their bodies to gain power. Anything to gain a potential advantage in all their jockeying for prestige.

I'm not sure how to say any of that politely, though, so I settle for, "It seems like everyone here does."

"Well, I'm not everyone." Alek pivots back toward the shelves as if he'd rather not face my scrutiny. His hand rises to the middle of his chest, where his godlen brand must be. "I dedicated myself to Estera, of course. But I wanted to know that whatever I accomplished, I brought about through my own abilities and not because of a divine leg up."

It's true, Julita tells me. At least, that he doesn't have a gift. We discussed all of our potential strengths when we first started meeting.

His commitment to relying on his own mortal abilities... is almost like my own. Other than the part where I do have a gift, just one I never asked for and that's actually a curse.

I can't help watching him for a little longer, taking in the staunch dedication that shows in every movement of his lean body.

Another question spills out of me. "What is it you're hoping to accomplish?"

"At the moment, I'll settle for preventing a second Great Retribution."

The dismissal in his flat tone kills my curiosity. I yank my gaze to the next row of books.

Along that bookcase and on to the next, I skim the titles in search of anything to do with the history of several centuries past. Alek continues his own perusal without comment.

Then a book catches my eye with enough of a jolt for me to break the silence. "They're not all in Silanian."

Alek's dry voice carries through the shelves from farther into the room. "No, most of us at the college know our Veldunian as well, and many have kept some fluency in Darium, if only for being able to access the records from when we were under the empire."

"I expected that. Not folk tales in Woudish." I flip through the pages and grin at the fanciful illustrations that decorate the pages between the curving

script.

Alek appears at the end of the aisle I was wandering down. “You can recognize Woudish? What, were your parents immigrants from Woudland too?”

I chuckle. “No. I just—living on the streets, it pays to keep up with all the news you can. And a lot of the best news comes from merchants. There was a Woudish expatriate who did a fair bit of business with his former countrymen when they passed through the city, and I found a couple of old teaching volumes on the language among the cast-off texts I had access to. It meant I could listen in on more of his conversations.”

Alek is outright gaping at me now. “You taught yourself Woudish.”

“I mean, I wouldn’t say I’m exactly fluent. I can follow the gist of a conversation and fairly simple text. I wouldn’t attempt a legal treatise, but I’d imagine I could handle this.” I hold up the book of folk tales with a hopeful expression.

Alek stares at me for a moment longer. Then he shakes his head with a sputter of a laugh. “Go ahead and borrow that one too. Gods above. Other than me, I only know three students here who’ve bothered to pick that language up.”

“Different priorities.” I turn to the opposite shelves, resuming my real search. “I suppose it can’t be totally useless even to a noble, or *you* wouldn’t have bothered learning it.”

“I like to know everything I can. Which I suppose is about the same as your reasons.”

Alek lingers at the end of the aisle for a few moments longer. For just an instant, his presence feels almost friendly.

Then his mouth twists into a smile that’s bittersweet. “Julita probably thinks we’re both absurd. She didn’t even like bothering with Veldunian. But then, she could hold anyone’s attention without even needing to speak, so she hardly needed it.”

The tenderness in his voice is so potent it sends a shiver through my nerves even though it’s got nothing to do with me. The guy really was over the moon for my ghostly passenger.

Not that he ever would have talked about a street rat like me that way regardless. It hardly matters.

But when Julita responds with a giggle of wry amusement, my hackles rise of their own accord. *Some of us do know the most useful things can’t be*

found in books. He's done his best, though.

I have to think she never talked to Alek in such a patronizing way when she was alive, or his feelings wouldn't have remained quite so fond.

Anya might be a vapid priss, but I don't think her assessment of Julita is totally wrong. My uninvited guest did have a habit of charming people simply to get what she wants.

I'd rather not think about to what extent that might include me. I'm on this quest for my own benefit now—for reasons she couldn't even guess at.

I tuck the Woudish folk tales under my arm alongside the Traveling Diaries and continue the search. Alek moves on to the next aisle over.

My head is starting to spin with all the titles I've taken in when the scholar lets out an exclamation of triumph. "If the answer's anywhere, it'll be in here."

As he lugs the thick volume he's found over to one of the room's small desks, I hustle to join him. He flips through the yellowed pages, sucking his full lower lip under his teeth in concentration.

"What exactly are we looking for?" I ask, leaning over the desk next to him.

A faint whiff of a scent like mingled citrus and mint reaches my nose, both tart and cool. Fitting for the man himself.

Alek keeps paging through the book, his eyes narrowing in concentration. "From what I recall from past readings, the one time magical suppression was commonly used was in the old monarch trials."

I frown. "The monarch trials?" That's one bit of information I haven't stumbled on myself.

He nods absently. "Before the Great Retribution and Darium's imposing of their empire, Silana's rulership wasn't entirely hereditary. When a king or queen died, their successor had to go through a series of challenges to prove themselves worthy to the people and the gods. If they failed, others could step up to vie for the throne."

I raise my eyebrows. "That sounds like a fairer way of doing things than just handing it over to the next in line automatically. Why did they stop?"

"It was rather barbaric. Some of the trials could get quite... bloody, and sometimes perfectly good candidates weren't able to take the crown because of injuries sustained. And I suppose it was simpler for Darium to control the monarchy when it was handled in a more straight-forward fashion."

"Darium hasn't ruled here in nearly a century," I point out.

Alek hums thoughtfully. “There’s something to be said for simplicity of inheritance even for ourselves. King Melchior did prove his worth by regaining our freedom from Emperor Vitus. And the Melchioreks don’t *have* to pass on the crown to the next in line genetically. They use their best judgment, and the country does just fine without any violent challenges.”

I don’t know if I’d say that all of Silana is doing “just fine.” But then, who knows if the rulers who won the throne through bloody trials were any kinder to their poorest citizens?

Alek stops and trails his fingers across a particular page. The ink has faded, and the handwriting style—from before printing presses like Da’s had been invented—is more ornate than I’m used to, but I can read it well enough to determine that this page is talking about a feat of “might.”

“Here.” Alek taps a spot near the bottom of the page. “For one particular challenge, they wanted to be sure the feat was accomplished through strength of will and body rather than anything magical. The prospective monarch ingested a specific herb... They call it “pipe fleece” here, but I’ve never heard of that plant before.”

Pipe fleece. My spirits leap. The name is unfamiliar to me too, but it’s a start.

“It’s probably a common name, like some people call volhana ‘pig’s lip.’ You’ve never run into it before?”

Alek shakes his head. “It mustn’t have been used often—the herb or the name. But botany is far from my specialty. And we don’t have that many records that survived both the Great Retribution and the empire’s purges.”

I straighten up. “I might be able to find out more—maybe even get my hands on some of the stuff. There are people I can ask.”

“If you give me their names—”

I shoot him a pointed look. “I mean people who are a lot more likely to talk freely with someone on their level than with a noble. Let me handle this. It’s one thing I’m actually better equipped to do than any of you.”

I must have gained a small measure of respect from the scholar during our search, because he tips his head in acknowledgment rather than arguing.

Alek hefts the book in his slim arms. “Even if you can find it, we don’t know how effective it actually was or how we’d get it to the right people without interfering with the rest of the school too severely. But the others might have some—”

“Don’t mention it to the others yet,” I break in.

His gaze jerks to me. “Why not?”

Because I don’t want anyone else speculating about that particular goal of mine.

The answer I give out loud sounds feebler than I like. “You just said we have no idea if it’d work—and I don’t even know if I can find it. Better not to waste anyone’s time thinking about it until we’ve sorted the first part out, right?”

Alek studies me for a few beats longer than I’m totally comfortable with. I make myself hold his gaze.

His lips purse, and whatever warmth I caught a glimpse of vanishes behind his shuttered eyes. “Fine. But I expect to hear about it as soon as you’ve discovered anything.”

He strides onward, leaving me wondering how I’ve managed to offend him now. And just how much I should regret it.

I trail behind him. “Where are you going?”

“There’s one thing I wanted to double-check in regards to scourge sorcery practices. I have managed to find a few accounts of their rituals that were missed in more general volumes of—”

His voice cuts off abruptly. I hurry over to find him pawing through the books strewn haphazardly across a shelf.

“They’re gone,” he says.

“What?”

Alek glances over at me with an anxious gleam in his bright eyes. “All three of the books I set aside here that had some mention of scourge sorcery. Someone’s taken them.”

My heart sinks. “The librarians realized and sent them to be destroyed?” I venture.

Alek puts my darker suspicion into words. “Or I wasn’t the only person already aware of them... and the same people who murdered Julita set out to make it even harder for anyone to figure out what horrors they’re committing.”

FIFTEEN



When I look up from the shopping list Stavros has just handed me, the former general is watching me with a gleam dancing in his dark eyes. “Do make sure it’s aged kivseed oil not fresh. And I hope you can make it through the errand without slicing anyone or anything up?”

I wrinkle my nose at him. “I haven’t stabbed you so far, so I’d say my self-control is working just fine.”

He cocks his head with the little twitch that tells me he’s refocusing his vision. Abruptly, I get the sense that he’s not just heckling me but intrigued despite himself. “I heard you slashed someone’s saddle during a hunt the other day.”

A chill runs down my back. I don’t want this man—this sorcerer-hunter—scrutinizing me any more than he’s already inclined to.

I force a guffaw and tuck the list into the pouch on my belt. A silk pouch on a gold-edged belt, naturally, since it needs to go with this fancy-ass dress. “I’d like to see them prove I did it.”

“Was there any particular reason you felt the need to send one of the students off their horse?”

She was asking for it, Julita mutters.

I opt for a slightly more detailed explanation. “She was questioning my qualifications for the assistant position. I thought it’d be worthwhile to demonstrate that I can take care of my opponents just fine.”

Stavros raises his eyebrows. “I suppose it proved something. Maybe next time you can make your point without damaging school property, though. Having the stablemaster venting at me is rather tiresome.”

“I’m ever so sorry,” I say, not at all apologetically, and gesture to the luxurious quarters around us. “I’m sure there’s money somewhere in the college’s extensive coffers to cover a saddle strap. And you wouldn’t have that problem if you’d let me do more than haul around equipment during your classes, so people would have seen I earned the spot.”

“I think *earned* is a bit of an exaggeration.” He chuckles and shakes his head. “Did it never occur to you that it might be better if people here *don’t* see how you handle a fight? You don’t approach combat like a noblewoman.”

I shrug. “I’m supposedly a paltry noblewoman from some lowly province and a family no one’s even heard of. Who knows what tactics we might prefer there?”

Then the full implications of what he said sink in.

I peer up at him, momentarily unsettled. “Are you trying to say that you’ve been treating me like a pack mule for my own protection?”

The man I’m most afraid of sending me to my death has actually been defending me?

I guess it’s in his own best interests that my true origins remain hidden, as much as he knows about them. Both in case it comes out that he helped me forge my new identity and to preserve Julita’s presence here. But it’s hard for me to imagine the arrogant jackass in front of me doing anything for any reason other than to annoy me.

And it’s not as if he’d do any of it if he knew the full truth about me.

Stavros’s mouth forms a slanted grin. “Somehow you’ve become a cornerstone in our plans, Thief. It would also be tiresome to have to start over after we’ve gone to the work of setting you up here.”

There’s still something more curious in his gaze than I’ve seen before. Is it possible I’ve earned a little respect from the former general as well?

I don’t really like the strange tingle of exhilaration that idea gives me. Anyway, at the moment I have much more need of something else from him.

I hold out my hand. “Speaking of work, can I get an advance on my pay? There are a couple of things I’d like to pick up for myself while I’m in town.”

This time Stavros’s eyebrows shoot up almost to the fringe of his blood-red hair. “You haven’t been supplied with enough fineries yet?”

I fold my arms over my chest. “Who says I want ‘fineries’? Women have needs.”

Making it sound like some sort of feminine issue does the trick. Stavros snorts and then sighs, but he produces a few coins from a drawer. “I suppose

it would look odd if I wasn't paying you some sort of salary."

"What, you figured I'd haul your dummies for free?"

"Your room and board here are pretty fine payment compared to what you made do with before, I'd imagine," he says dryly, and I can't even argue that point.

But he offers the coins, and I slip them into my purse with the list. I don't need to give actual money to the shopkeepers for the supplies he's asking for, since the college has its accounts set up anywhere I'm supposed to shop, but I don't want my personal purchases ending up on any official record.

"Do you have the new passcode for the entrance?" he asks.

I rattle off this week's absurd phrase. "Light fires for lusty ruby lizards. Don't worry. I'll be back to make you regret all your recent life decisions in a few hours."

The gleam in his eyes flares a little brighter. "I'm counting on it."

I definitely shouldn't be tingling over that look.

As I head out of the Domi, Julita pipes up in the back of my head. *You and Stav seem to be getting along a little better now that you've had a chance to get used to each other.*

She sounds pleased about it. I roll my eyes. "I don't think it's time to throw a party to celebrate our deep and abiding friendship."

It doesn't hurt, you at least making peace with him. Even if he can be an ass, he'll have your back when it counts. I wouldn't have gone to him otherwise.

I'm not sure how much I trust my ghostly guest's ability to judge character beyond what was useful to her goals, but I know better than to say as much out loud.

Walking through the streets of the central wards in full noble garb is a strange experience. Apparently this getup is much more convincing than my old faux-silk dress, or else my intensive practice at keeping up the airs is paying off. The regular if respectable citizens who cross my path give me plenty of room on the streets, and the business owners plying their wares tip their heads to me as if *I'm* respectable.

It takes almost no time at all to place the orders Stavros asked for. Most of the supplies will be delivered to the college over the next few days, but I tuck the kivseed oil and a couple of other smaller items that he wanted right away into my pouch.

Then I stroll through one of the crumbling gates in the old city walls and

make my way through the narrower streets of the middle wards.

What are you up to now, Ivy? Julita asks eagerly.

“I figured that while I’m out and about, I should stop by the nearest of the herbal shops the Crow’s Close apothecary told us about.”

Oh, excellent. Perhaps the owner can get us closer to tracking down those scourge sorcerers.

“That’s the plan.” Not all of it, but the part I’m willing to tell her about. “Other than Wendos and those two students you pointed out to me at the hunt, is there anyone else I should be keeping an eye out for—anyone you’ve seen around when you’ve noticed the evidence of sorcery?”

Julita gives a sigh of frustration. *No. The only indications are what I told you before. No one was around the times in the woods, and there were dozens of people in the hall when I overheard that murmuring directed at the prince. With all the jostling, I don’t know who was close enough to me in that moment... I froze up a little at first, hearing those words.*

A sense of shame tinges that last sentence. My gut twists at the thought of her childhood torments.

I haven’t asked her much about her life outside of her investigations—have tried to pretend I don’t have a ghost invading my skull as much as possible. That’s seeming increasingly ridiculous.

And gods, she must be lonely. I’m not exactly great company even to the living.

I check the street signs at a corner to confirm I’m in the right spot on my mental map of the city. “You said your brother disappeared—your family hasn’t heard from him at all? How long has it been since he headed to the college?”

More than three years now, and there’s been nothing. It probably sounds horrid, but I hope he’s dead. My parents assume so. I’m going to be a far better countess over Nikodi than he ever— Well. I would have been.

My stomach clenches up more at the reminder of the future she’s lost.

I wait until a couple of passersby are behind me before murmuring, “I’m sorry. I guess that’s what you were studying at the college for?”

Yes, I was on the self-governing track. So many subjects to consider as master of your own domain. She manages a light laugh. *Unfortunate that few of them come in handy for unraveling a conspiracy.*

“Should I let your parents know what happened to you, one way or another, at some point?” I venture. I have no idea whether her relationship

with them was any better than mine with my own.

Not for now. The longer my killers don't know that anyone's aware of my murder, the better, I think. I normally only went home for the quarterly holiday weeks, and I didn't write often, so they won't be wondering.

She doesn't sound particularly attached to them, but then, they did fail to notice her brother torturing her for years. I can see how that might put a damper on any familial fondness.

"Is there anything else I could do?" I find myself asking. "I mean... To make things easier for you? I'm not sure how much I *can* do, but I'd try, anyway."

It isn't her fault we ended up in this mess, after all. And however scheming she was with her friends or the rest of her classmates, it was for an honorable purpose in the end.

I can't say she's been a horrible guest, unwanted or not.

Julita is quiet for long enough that I start to wonder if I've offended her. Then she lets out a softer laugh.

I can't think of anything. You're already doing an awful lot, Ivy. If I can see the scourge sorcerers brought down because you helped me keep fighting them from beyond the grave, that's the best gift I could possibly have asked for.

How would she feel about it if she knew I only agreed because of the gift I'm hoping to get—the forgiveness I hope to earn from the gods?

Hopefully I'll never have to find that out. May she move on into the peace of her godlen's embrace before I make my appeal.

As I reach a busier stretch of middle-ward stores and eateries, I fall silent. I'm already drawing plenty of gazes with my fine gown—some merely curious, some tinged with hostility.

Most nobles don't roam beyond the inner wards on foot.

My skin starts to crawl. The moment I spot something suitable in a store window, I duck inside and spend two of the fat coins Stavros gave me on a plain brown cloak that covers most of my dress.

The shop I'm most interested in is tucked away in a quiet row of cafes and stores not far from the old city wall. The man slipping past its weathered wooden door as I approach isn't dressed as finely as I am beneath my new cloak, but his fine linen tunic and embroidered over-vest tell me he's doing well for himself.

I shouldn't stick out badly—and the owner is less likely to treat my

questions with suspicion if I appear to be one of the elite.

Like most herbal shops, the interior I step into is dim. A musky scent with an assortment of undertones from prickly to sweet fills the air, some of it drifting off the bundles of dried plants dangling along the edges of the main room.

Behind her counter in front of shelves packed with glass jars of various sizes, the shopkeeper squints at me through wire-framed glasses. Her ample frame is wrapped in a linen dress the same cornsilk yellow as her otherwise graying hair.

She draws herself straighter at the sight of me. “How can I help you today, good lady?”

I let out a breezy giggle, as if I don’t have much other than air in my head. “I think this is the place my friends recommended to me, but I might have gotten their directions mixed up. Have you had any customers from the college lately?”

The woman taps her lips, frowning in concentration. She looks as if she’s honestly considering the question, not coming up with a lie.

“No one who’s specifically said they are, but plenty of folks don’t say where they’re from, and I don’t like to pry.”

“Hmm. They’re all about my age, and they’d be wearing the latest style of clothing. One of the fellows has dark brown hair about to here”—I gesture vaguely toward my ears—“and a rather dark complexion. On the tall side. The other is fairly short in stature and has curly blond hair. Or maybe you’ve seen a lady with a red streak in her brown hair?”

The shopkeeper has knit her brow. She shakes her head. “I’m sorry, my lady. I can’t say for sure that I’ve seen any of them.”

“Oh.” I push my lip into the slightest of pouts. “I must have gotten myself mixed up. It happens sometimes. I suppose, now that I’m here... Do *you* have any pipe fleece in stock?”

The furrows on the woman’s forehead deepen. “Pipe fleece? I haven’t heard anyone call the stuff that in ages. You mean jazfern?”

I giggle again. “Oh, is that what it’s called normally? We’re supposed to find a plant mentioned in an old book and bring a sample back to share in class. I thought that one sounded funny.”

The shopkeeper only looks puzzled now, but she steps back from the counter toward her back room. “I don’t have much of it. Not much use for it really that I know of, except it helps keep a few rare substances I deal in

stable. Let me see if I can spare a bit.”

Interesting. Well, an herb that can stabilize potent substances seems like a decent candidate for stabilizing one’s magic.

We don’t know that no one from the college bought dartling eggshell here, Julita points out as the woman shuffles around in the back. *Shouldn’t we focus on that instead of this pipe fleece stuff from a book that was over five hundred years old?*

I nod in an attempt to tell her I haven’t forgotten her main quest. But my heart lifts when the woman returns with a small bundle of purplish dried leaves.

“This should be enough to show it,” she says. “If you need more, you’ll have to let me know ahead of time.”

I smile brightly. “I’ll do that. Thank you so much. Since you’ve been so helpful—one of my other friends heard of something called dartling egg she thought might be useful in her coursework. Do you have that here?”

A twitch of tension crosses the woman’s expression before her expression goes still. “What kind of coursework is she doing?”

I cock my head. “Something to do with medicine, I’d imagine. She’s training to become a medic.”

The shopkeeper relaxes just slightly. She obviously knows that the stuff can be put to unsavory uses, but it must have some legitimate functions as well. “It’s not requested often. I only get it by special order.”

I put on my best cajoling voice. “I don’t suppose you’ve gotten one of those orders recently enough that I could jump the queue? She’d be so grateful.”

The woman shakes her head briskly. “Nothing here and nothing on the way. I’m sorry, my lady.”

All right, then our conspirators haven’t been getting regular stock here, if she can be believed. Not all that helpful, but it does let us cross one avenue of investigation off the list.

I thank the shopkeeper again profusely and pay for my jazfern. Popping it into one of my gown’s discreet pockets rather than my pouch, I’m just ambling out the door when I nearly bump into a lithe, unmistakably familiar figure passing by.

Casimir beams at me, his gorgeous face more stunning than ever with the sun shining down on it. “Oh, hello! What a coincidence bumping into one of my schoolmates here.”

SIXTEEN



My heart skips a beat and my tongue tangles for a moment in my shock. And not only because I'm afraid Casimir will ask what I just bought.

Why couldn't the courtesan be at least kind of a jerk like the other guys, so I'd have an easier time ignoring his epic gorgeousness?

I gather myself, setting my hands on my hips and lifting an eyebrow. "It does seem to be a pretty big coincidence."

Casimir's smile turns a bit sly, which somehow takes him to yet another level of breathtaking. "There's a beauty goods shop just down the street that's one of my favorites. I don't suppose that happens to be where you're headed next?"

We aren't really supposed to be spending time together. Did he contrive this meeting to give us an excuse to talk?

What could he have wanted to talk about so urgently?

I'd better find out. I match his smile as well as I can. "Actually, it is."

Casimir turns with a discreet gesture to indicate which way we should walk. "I'd be happy to give you some recommendations if you need them."

"Sure, that sounds great."

As we stroll farther down the street, I flick my gaze around to make sure no one's all that close by. I've been getting a lot of practice at talking so that no one will overhear. "How did you know where I'd be?"

Casimir keeps his voice equally low. "I saw you heading out looking rather purposeful, and I remembered the herb shops you told us we should look into. This is the closest one. And I really do like the beauty store down

here, so it wasn't any hardship to wander by."

Julita snickers. *Oh, Cas. Isn't he just lovely?*

I suppose so. I still need to know: "What's going on? Why did you need to talk to me?"

Casimir glances over at me, his pine-green eyes briefly pensive beneath the loose waves of his tawny hair. "Outside of our meetings, you haven't had anyone *you* can really talk to other than Stavros, and I know he wasn't entirely on board with the plan."

He pauses, his eyes searching mine. "And I suppose Julita, but as much as we appreciate that she isn't entirely gone, that can't be an entirely comfortable situation for you either. I thought you might be feeling isolated. It must be a strain constantly putting on a persona in a setting you're unused to."

So he followed me out here and waited around until he saw me... so that he could offer a little company? Even as I try to wrap my head around that generosity, a lump solidifies in my gut.

It is lovely of him.

What are the chances he'd bother if he knew what I really am—why I actually came out here?

"Thank you," I say around the matching lump that's crept into my throat. "You didn't have to—"

"I know," Casimir says easily, with a glint of his gemstone teeth. "But we are on this quest together, even if we have to pretend to be apart most of the time. We should support each other when we can."

I can't help giving him a skeptical sideways glance. "You didn't have anything better to do?"

He knocks his elbow playfully against my arm. "No classes this afternoon. If it makes you feel better, my career's entire purpose is making people happy. You can consider this field work."

There's probably something wrong with me that framing the situation that way does make me feel better. He hasn't mentioned my recent purchase, so maybe I really am safe.

I can admit it's a bit of a relief to talk to someone everyone else can see exists, who knows at least some of my secrets.

I study the shops along the curve of the road. "So, where is this beauty goods shop anyway?"

Casimir points. "That one with the pink trim along the edge of the roof."

Their soap is the best you'll find anywhere. If you'd like to be left with the softest skin imaginable, that's the one to go with."

I'm not sure I want to tell him that the softness of my skin isn't something I've ever considered. I rub my thumb over my wrist surreptitiously and wonder if it'd feel horrifyingly rough to a noble courtesan.

Well, what does it matter? *I'm* not really a noble anyway, and I'll go back to not being one, gods' forgiveness or not, sooner rather than later.

Nonetheless, I let Casimir usher me into the store. The air inside is as perfumed as the herbal shop, but in a softer, sweeter way that reminds me of Casimir's honeyed scent.

I like it on him, but I'm not sure I'd want to drown myself in the stuff.

While I stand there awkwardly, suddenly feeling as if I have ten pounds of grit on my skin and everyone can see it, Casimir goes to a display table and plucks up a few wrapped soaps. The preteen girl in a modest dress who was giving the table's legs a quick polish steps backward at that moment and bumps into him.

She jerks to the side with a flare of red in her cheeks. "I'm so sorry, sir. I didn't see you there."

Casimir waves off her concern. "It was barely a jostle." He glances down at the table. "I can see you've been doing your job well."

The girl's stance relaxes. She shoots him a shy smile before turning to one of the other tables.

As I watch, a strange flutter passes through my chest that has nothing to do with the courtesan's looks. There's something almost wondrous about the ease with which he spreads his own contentment around him.

How does someone born in the inner wards become that generous?

Less wondrous is the reaction of the gaunt gentleman customer who's also watching from where he was perusing the selection of colognes. He curls his lip in a sneer. "You don't need to worry about 'jostling' him anyway. That's practically his line of work."

The elegant woman behind the store counter stiffens. Casimir doesn't bat an eye.

He dips his head respectfully toward the man. "I'm sure we all deserve the same consideration."

The man snorts and steps closer. "What consideration do you have for everyone else's sensibilities, flashing your gaudy teeth around as if we don't know what they mean? Bilking 'clients' for pay for what should be freely

given? They shouldn't allow degenerates like you—"

He moves to jab Casimir's arm, and my hand instinctively jerks toward my nearest knife.

But Casimir moves faster.

With a flick of his fingers I can barely track, the courtesan catches the man's wrist and twists. The man lets out a yelp at the sudden jarring angle.

An instant later, Casimir releases him. The gentleman backs away, hissing while he rubs his wrist.

Julita cackles. *The puffed-up prig got what he deserved.*

Casimir simply smiles. "Ardone blesses some of us with talents just as valuable to many as those brought by any of the other godden. We all deserve compensation for our skills as well."

The man starts to sputter, but the shopkeeper clears her throat. "I don't allow folk in the shop who'll harass my valued customers. I think it's time for you to take your leave."

The prick lets out a huff, but he goes. The lady aims an apologetic glance at Casimir. "I'm sorry your shopping was disturbed."

He shrugs. "All's well that ends well."

As he motions me over to a far wall where several ornate hair pins and sticks rest on shallow wooden shelves, I can't hold back my awed surprise. "Have you been taking lessons from Stavros?"

Casimir chuckles. "That would be more extensive than is really necessary. Part of the training for certain tracks of the companionship division covers defensive fighting. Enough to deal with the occasional judgmental ass like that one—or to step in if a patron comes under threat during our time together."

I guess that makes sense, even if I'd never have thought of it myself. I fidget with my cloak, willing away the flush that's spread all across my skin.

Is there something wrong with me that I find him even more appealing now that I know he could break a man's wrist if he wanted to?

Casimir shows no sign that he's noticed my discomfort. He picks up one of the hair pins.

"You know, this one would look amazing with the reddish sheen to your hair. That color is almost like amber. I'll bet every woman at the college has been envying it... We might as well make them envy it more."

He flashes another grin at me and brandishes the pin, which holds a vibrant teal stone that I can't help thinking would also match my new favorite

dress awfully well too. As much as I know about fashion coordination.

The metal around the gemstone gleams gold. My hand comes to rest on my pouch. “I don’t think I can afford—”

Casimir waves off my protest before I can finish it. “I consider it a service to the entire city to add to your beauty. It’s no hardship.”

I manage not to guffaw at the idea of me having much beauty to begin with. It takes more effort not to totally stiffen up when Casimir reaches to fix the pin in my hair, adjusting my current casual updo.

He’s so deftly graceful that his fingers barely graze my skin, but a quiver of heat races over my scalp and down my back anyway. His sandalwood smell trickles through the thicker perfumes of the shop.

As he eases back so I can look at myself in the polished silver mirror next to the shelves, I swallow thickly. The gem really does gleam strikingly against the reddish blond of my hair.

“There,” he says. “It’s absolutely meant to be, Kindness.”

He adds a grin with the lilting nickname, a callback to what he told me after he brought my dresses.

The reference only reminds me of just how kind he’s being.

I cast my gaze toward him. “I should be the one calling you that. Is this how you are with all your... your friends?”

I don’t know if I can really call myself his friend. I wouldn’t be in reality, if we were both being ourselves.

Of course, it might not even be me he’s thinking about when he makes a gesture like this. He’s being sweet to the woman who *was* his friend—and maybe more—who’s experiencing it on some level alongside me.

The reminder that he might not even be seeing *me* when he looks at me—not really—hits me like a bucket of icy water. My smile tightens, and I glance away.

Casimir answers in his usual gentle tone. “If I see an opportunity to bring some extra brightness into someone’s life, and it’s no trouble for me to do it, I do.” From the corner of my eye, I think I see his smile falter just a little too. “It’s what I was put in this world for.”

My attention jerks back to him, just as his expression turns thoughtful. He rests his hand on my arm, the warmth seeping through the silk sleeve of my dress. “It’s been a long time since anyone tried to make you happy, hasn’t it? Much too long.”

Between his touch and the too-accurate observation, my mind freezes up.

All at once, I want nothing more than to escape his caring, perceptive gaze.

“Thank you,” I say quickly, detaching the pin. “I appreciate it; it’s just too much. I should be getting back to the college for Stavros’s next class.”

The second I’ve set the pin back on the shelf, I’m hurrying for the door.

“Ivy,” Casimir calls after me, but he won’t want to make a scene when we’re barely supposed to know each other. I don’t hear his footsteps behind me as I stride down the street.

What was that about? Julita asks. You’ve got to know Cas didn’t mean any harm by the remark. He really does want to please everyone.

And she obviously can’t see why that wouldn’t make me feel better. “I don’t like accepting gifts I can’t reciprocate,” I murmur, which is maybe a quarter of the truth.

Julita sniffs. Suit yourself. I don’t see any reason to refuse generosity when both people enjoy it. She pauses. I won’t be offended if you get more friendly with him—or any of the others—you know. Even if I were alive, it isn’t as if I’d staked any claim over them.

“I don’t think that would be a good idea.” But even after I’ve said that, I have to add, “Did you ever get... more than friendly with any of them?”

Oh, no, Julita says, as if she finds the idea absurd. Maybe a little flirtation, but, you know, sometimes that’s necessary to judge a man’s investment. I might consider them friends, but exposing the scourge sorcerers was the important thing. It wouldn’t do to distract them from our goal.

I’m weirdly relieved by her answer and also a little queasy, after seeing how devoted each of the men appear to be to her. But who am I to tell her how she should have run her life when she doesn’t even have one now?

By the time I’ve made it back to Florian’s central hill, the walk has smoothed out my thoughts. I ignore the thrum of the temple’s energy as I skirt it and then pace through the steps dictated by the passcode to enter the college.

As I cross the first courtyard to the outer school building, I scan the grounds around me out of habit. My gaze snags on a stout older man with silvered brown hair and a thick brow, who’s pointed out something to the boy beside him.

My steps slow just slightly while I take them in. The boy is far too young to attend the college, which welcomes students starting in their eighteenth year. I’d be surprised if he’s even old enough to have completed his dedication ceremony.

Julita notices my curiosity. *It isn't unusual for the staff to bring around young relatives or the children of friends who are considering what gift they might want to ask for or even which godlen to dedicate themselves to. Give them a little tour, a sense of what possibilities await.*

Her explanation should make perfect sense. The boy looks every bit the noble child in his trim jacket and polished boots.

But just as I'm about to leave them behind, the kid taps his chest with a swift swirl of his fingers. Not the typical four-part gesture of the divinities, but an appeal I've never seen anyone outside the fringes make.

My feet stall in their tracks for a second before I force myself to move onward.

As subtly as I can, I spare another glance over my shoulder at the professor and the boy—taking in the slightly defensive hunch of the kid's shoulders, the lower lip he's gnawing at. My certainty expands until it's an unshakable heaviness in my chest.

What's wrong? Julita asks as I hustle through the entrance hall and across the inner courtyard to the Domi. *I told you, it's utterly normal.*

I let out my breath with a low mutter. "And how normal is it for someone to bring a street urchin around, dressed up like a noble?"

SEVENTEEN



Are you absolutely sure? Julita asks for approximately the millionth time.

I frown at my sallow reflection in the mirror as if I can see her through my light blue eyes. “Yes. That motion the boy made—it’s a thing the kids on the fringes pick up from each other. A little appeal for safety and mercy when they’re too wary to show the full three-fingered tap. I’ve never seen a merchant or anyone from the middle wards use it, let alone a noble.”

My ghostly passenger stirs restlessly as I pin back a few strands of hair that escaped the formal loops during my trek through the city. *I haven’t seen it either. But I would have thought it was just a random nervous gesture.*

“Because you haven’t seen it before to recognize it. No one who’s normally here would have—the college wants even the cleaning and cooking staff to have middle-ward manners.” I stalk back into the main room of Stavros’s quarters. “You said the professor he was with is Ster. Torstem. Have you seen him bring that kid around before?”

I can’t remember. Like I told you, it’s hardly unusual.

“What do you know about Torstem?”

He teaches law for the leadership division. I’d have had a class with him next year... Julita trails off and then seems to gather herself. *I hadn’t paid much attention to him other than that. He doesn’t draw much attention.*

“Hmm.” I pace the room a few times, and my stomach gurgles. Which gives me the perfect inspiration for my next move. “Other people here will know more about him. And it’s just coming on supper time. Let’s see if I can find a good conversational partner in the dining hall.”

Even if it is strange, whatever Ster. Torstem is doing, it isn't necessarily connected to the scourge sorcerers, Julita points out as I head down the hall. Plenty of other unfortunate things go on here.

"I've already seen that," I mutter. "But it's not as if we have any other leads to follow up on just yet."

Stepping through the broad doorway with its carvings of Prospira's and Ardone's sigils—recognizing that food is both a bounty and a pleasure—I automatically tense up. The dining hall has become a place of both delight and dread for me.

Delight because of the skillfully simmered and roasted dishes that give off scrumptious scents into the vast space.

Dread because I'm in the same vicinity as more of the rich pricks who attend this place than anywhere else.

I pause off to the side of the door to assess my options. Most of the wide sprawl of stone-tiled floor holds circular tables that can seat as many as eight—ten if the nobles deign to squish.

Nearly two thirds of those are already full. I've caught the start of the dinner rush.

High up on the righthand wall, a shimmering magical display lists the evening's options. Beneath it, students have queued to grab plates of their chosen entrees and accompaniments from various counters open to the kitchen through low openings in the wall.

Well, some of them have queued. I'm just swallowing saliva from my watering mouth and deciding I should start with food before interrogating when Anya and a cluster of her associates sweep straight up to one of the nearest counters, totally ignoring the line.

I have a second to notice Alek among the few students at the head of the queue there, the polished leather of his mask catching the light of the crystal chandeliers overhead. Then Anya flicks her fingers, and a blazing glow explodes in the students' midst.

I jump about a foot off the ground in shock, my hand yanking straight to the folds of silk skirt that conceal the knife strapped to my left thigh. But the glow fades an instant later with a few pained gasps.

The students who'd been at the counter stumble away. Alek is wincing and swiping at his eyes.

"Make a little room, weirdie," Anya sneers at him, sauntering into the space the other students cleared. She narrows her eyes at a woman who was

there too and bats at the other student's long hair to briefly expose a strip of scar where her ear should have been. "I don't know why they let the failures in to begin with."

That girl gave up both her ears and didn't even get a gift, Julita informs me with a horrified shudder I can feel. My gut knots.

It's always a risk making a sacrifice. If the godlen you're appealing to decides you're asking for more than you've offered or that your intentions are dishonest, they can refuse.

But of course, you can't reattach whatever you've already chopped off or pulled out.

Anya clearly got a gift of her own, whatever that trick with the light is meant to be. She lifts a plate off the counter, swivels around, and catches me glaring at her.

Her lips curve in disdain. She raises her voice to carry across the ten feet between us. "What are you looking at?"

I shouldn't say anything at all. I should drop my gaze and walk away as if I'm not seething.

I've already got enough potential enemies in this place.

But my instincts react to the direct question before I can rein them in. My mouth pops open, my answer just as loud. "Nothing much, obviously."

Several gazes jerk our way. Alek stares at me, probably cursing me out in his head for making a scene, as if she didn't deserve it for shoving him around.

While Anya bristles, I raise my chin and convince my feet to get moving as if I've got better things to do than listen to her response.

Which I do. My stomach is gnawing on itself now, and who knows when I'll ever get to dig into food this fine after I've left the college for good?

My heart thuds a little faster as I weave through the crowd, but Anya's dignity saves me from having her chase me down hurling insults. I'm sure I'll pay for the jab some other way in the future, but future-me can deal with that.

Supposedly the gift she asked for was simply to light things up, Julita says. *I've heard she gave up several toes and wears special shoes to compensate. She wants to marry some prominent provint or baron, and maybe she figured a wife who could give him a divine glow would be an excellent selling point. But somewhere in the past several years, she figured out that she could make the light intense enough to be painful.*

And she uses it to skip the dinner line. Why am I not surprised? That's

probably the biggest concern Anya faces in her entire day.

One of the counters near the back of the room has barely any line at all. I grab a plate off that one, figuring whatever's unpopular with nobles still has to beat fringe scroungings by a mile.

When I scan the tables, the first person my gaze catches on is one I can't go chat with. Casimir isn't likely to know much about the professors from the other divisions anyway, I'd imagine.

Unless Ster. Torstem has a taste for courtesans.

I realize abruptly that the man who stirred up so many feelings in me this afternoon has two plates in front of him. It looks like he's dutifully cutting the slab of meat on one into bite-sized pieces... while the nobleman next to him strokes his shoulder, eyeing him like *he's* a delectable slab of meat.

Julita chuckles. *His patrons do ask to be spoiled in the most childish ways sometimes. I think the men are even worse for it than the women.*

My stomach flips over. What else is Casimir going to do for his current patron after dinner?

I yank my eyes away. It's not as if he hasn't mentioned that he's already taking on work in his chosen field.

It's not as if I'm idiot enough to think I could pursue even a proper friendship with him, let alone more.

So the idea of how much he'd offer to people who *aren't* me definitely doesn't leave a lingering wobble in my gut. That can't be anything but my hunger catching up with me.

Where else can I sit?

I notice Romild, the woman who wanted the job as Stavros's assistant, glowering at me like her eyes could fling daggers at me. I'll give that table a wide berth.

Oh, there's Esmae, wandering between the seats with her own plate deciding on a spot. She glances over at the same moment and waves for me to join her.

She's in the leadership division too—and she's the only person here outside of Julita's men who's been at all welcoming. She might know a thing or two about Torstem.

We settle into seats at one end of a table while the three women already eating at the other side continue chatting away as if we're not there.

"What did you do to Anya?" Esmae asks. "People are talking as if she's about to declare war."

I snort and wield my fork. “I said a grand total of three words. After she’d already done a damned sight worse to a few people simply for being where she wanted to be.”

Esmæ grimaces. “She doesn’t usually push things very far. People find it easier not to raise a fuss.”

“I didn’t mean to,” I grumble, and pop a bite of the uncertain meat and creamy sauce into my mouth. Then it takes me several seconds to remember what I actually wanted to talk to Esmæ about, because everyone in this room is a nitwit for lining up elsewhere—this dish is the best thing I’ve ever tasted.

When I drag myself out of the daze of my unrefined tastes, I glance over at Esmæ, who’s picking at her own meal much more daintily than I am. I adjust my grip on my fork to the politest possible angle. “Have you had any classes with Ster. Torstem?”

Esmæ cocks her head thoughtfully as she chews. “Not so far. He mainly teaches the senior students. Why?”

I shrug as if it’s not all that important to me. “I recognized the name—I think one of my uncles back home went to school with him. Figured I’d let him know what his old schoolmate is up to these days. Does he do much around the school other than teach?”

“He runs a few different student organizations,” Esmæ says immediately, so clearly I came to the right person. “The mock trials confederate, the Silanian-Icarian brotherhood, and the bug club.” She wrinkles her nose.

Hmm, Julita says. Wendos is in the ‘bug club’—the entomology society. That was one of the various clubs we’ve noted that would also give the participant an excuse to go off campus and potentially conduct illicit rituals.

Well, that could be a useful connection—if Julita is right that Wendos has continued his scourgish ways.

I smile at Esmæ. “Are you a member of any of those?”

She chuckles. “Oh, no, I just like to be aware of all the opportunities in my division.”

Julita makes a derisive sound. And she talked as if I’m a bootlicker.

“Does Torstem work on legal cases outside of the college?” I ask, pondering how a professor from the royal college would end up running into any street urchins to begin with.

“Not that I’ve heard about. But it’s possible.” Esmæ knits her brow. “He seems fairly approachable. I’m sure if you told him about your uncle, he’d be happy to talk with you even though you’re not a student of his.”

That would be convenient if I actually had an uncle. But I've always been able to find out plenty of information without talking directly to my target before.

"I'll have to do that," I say as I poke my fork into another morsel of meat

—
—and a slender arm slams into my shoulder.

An ample splash of red wine smacks the bodice of my gown, soaking through to my skin in an instant. I jerk around to find Anya dangling the errant glass from her fingers and holding her other hand to her lips in mock concern.

"Oh, I'm so sorry, I can be so clumsy at the worst times." Her gaze drops to my dress. "At least I've given you an excuse to find something better to wear to the ball."

As her friends titter around her, she sashays off. I pull at the wet fabric and groan. The stain has already seeped through the pale gray silk all the way past my belt into the skirt.

Maybe I should be glad I don't have to spend any more time wondering what my payback will be. And that it was the gray dress, not my favorite.

"She is *such* a beast sometimes," Esmae mutters, dabbing at my side with her napkin and making a face. "Come on, there's the washing room just over there. If we get some water on it quickly, the stain might not fully take."

I let her hustle me over to the room off to the side of the dining hall that holds several latrine stalls and a few large sinks. It becomes obvious within less than a minute that no amount of water is going to stop my dress from looking like a piebald horse.

"It's fine," I say with a crooked smile. "There are few things I care about *less* than her ruining this gown. I'd rather not let her totally ruin my dinner."

Esmae purses her lips, but she must be able to tell there's no saving the dress anyway.

We'll find a way to make Anya regret this some other time, Julita says, with a calculating note in her voice that makes me glad I'm the one in charge here.

As we hustle back to our table, I glance across the room. I don't see Anya anywhere nearby, and Alek is either lost in the crowd now or gone back to his room with his food. I've lost track of Casimir too, but maybe that's for the best.

Benedikt has arrived at a table a few over from ours. When our eyes

momentarily lock, he twitches his eyebrow upward in either confusion or amusement.

I suppose I can fill him in on tonight's adventures at the meeting tomorrow, if he's concerned.

My delicious food is thankfully still warm. As I gulp down another mouthful, my mind turns over Anya's very specific insult. "There's a ball coming up?"

Esmæ looks at me as if I've broken out in purple polka dots. "In two days. Haven't you heard people talking about it? I'd have thought Stavros would have mentioned it. We have one every month, with everyone at the college invited—well, students and teaching staff, anyway."

I decide not to tell her that barely anyone other than her talks to me at all, and when Stavros does, it's mostly to inform me of my inadequacies. Maybe he doesn't think I should go?

I can't say a quiet night alone in his quarters sounds like a *bad* thing by comparison. He has a lot of books I haven't read yet.

"I assume you're going," I say to Esmæ, feeling the need to return her friendliness.

She nods, a dreamy smile crossing her face. "They're really the most enjoyable part of being at the college. And sometimes staff from the palace attend too! It's an excellent chance to mingle with them if you're hoping they'll look favorably on you at graduation."

I swallow some more of the mystery meat that I'm increasingly certain must be goat. "Is that what you're planning on—working at the palace?"

"I hope so." Esmæ ducks her head sheepishly. "That's what I've wanted for as long as I can remember. I definitely have no interest in returning to my family's county as the last of four heirs. And what could be grander than a position serving the royal family themselves?"

That would be pretty grand, if grand is your thing. My attention settles on her silk eye patch. It feels like she's opened up enough that it's safe to ask, "The dedication gift you asked for—is that something meant to serve members of the court?"

Esmæ's hand flutters to the patch's strap. "Yes. I'm dedicated to Jurnus—I can send messages quickly across long distances. I thought that could be useful with military negotiations and trade and all sorts of things."

"I'd imagine so," I say honestly. It's a good gift, and an appropriate one from the godlen who oversees both communication and travel, but it's not of

much use to her if she doesn't land the job. She must be incredibly committed to have made so large a sacrifice.

She peers at me with her remaining eye. "What's your gift, Ivy? You're obviously interested in the military arts—did you dedicate to Sabrelle?"

I open my mouth, sorting through my options of just how extensively I want to lie, and a strange sensation washes over me.

It's not the intense dizziness I felt before when Julita tried to take over—more a lightheadedness, as if my skull is detaching from the rest of my body. Kind of like the first time I discovered pub cider and downed three glasses far too close together.

A giggle spills from my lips. I'm not sure what's funny, but the whole world is going topsy turvy. That's pretty hilarious.

Esmæ's forehead has furrowed. "Are you all right?"

A cold streak of fear cuts through my unbalanced state. My body sways, and I can't seem to hold my spine rigid.

What's happened to me?

"I think—possibly not," I manage to say, clamping my hand against the table for balance. My plate rattles.

My plate, nearly cleared of food. Food that I left unmonitored for a few minutes after Anya drenched me with wine.

A fucking beast indeed. Did she sprinkle some kind of powdered drug over it?

It might not even have been her. Romild could have seen me leave and made use of the opportunity too.

I definitely have too many enemies here for someone who's only been at the school for a matter of days.

Whatever drug I've ingested, its effects are still escalating. My vision blurs and doubles and then simply wobbles around like a pond someone's dropped a stone into. I'm somehow losing my grip on the table even though neither it nor I are going anywhere.

Esmæ mutters a not particularly ladylike curse and scrambles to her feet. "That terror. If we could prove she poisoned you—this is an *attack*."

I laugh. Bubbles are tickling up from my gut all the way to my throat. "Not poison. Doesn't hurt. I just feel... like everything's floating in circles."

Whoever did this, were they hoping I'd make a fool of myself in front of the dining hall? Say or do something that would call into question my position as Stavros's assistant?

I sway backward and nearly upend my chair. As the legs rap back onto the floor, Esmæ tugs me onto my feet.

I stumble, trying to get my bearings, knowing the floor is flat but feeling as if it's bobbing like a badly constructed dock.

There's a flash of gold at the corner of my vision. Two Benedikts—no, it's just one—no, wait, now there's three of them overlapping as they all lean against the neighboring table.

"She looks like she hit the wine a little too hard. Or did they put something extra special in that curry?"

He keeps his tone droll, but he must be concerned, or he wouldn't have risked coming over at all. The bubbles turn warm with gratitude, and suddenly I'm grinning.

"I think Anya put something in her food," Esmæ says in a low voice. "I'm going to bring her back to her room."

"Aww, and deprive us of the possible entertainment?" Benedikt teases, but his tone goes just slightly serious when he adds, "I've heard she's staying in Stavros's quarters."

The bastard's bastard is playing the same joker as always but conveying the important information at the same time. Julita picked pretty well with him too.

I try to say so, but all I manage to do is giggle uncontrollably. I wobble along with Esmæ out into the hall and over to the stairwell.

"Never had food that fancy," I remark, and burst into more laughter.

Esmæ shakes her head. "You'll have to be careful. Who knows what she'll try next time."

She pauses, gripping my elbow as I maneuver my unsteady feet up the stairs. "Julita's been gone an awfully long time now. Anya obviously had it in for her too. You haven't heard from her at all?"

Does she think Anya offed her? For some reason, that idea makes me laugh too.

Anya in a dirty Slaughterwell alley knifing someone. I could more easily picture her flying to the moon.

"Don't know," I mumble. "She's been quiet."

She's being very quiet right now. Maybe she can't speak through the haze in my head?

"I hope no one here hurt her. Even a drug like this at the wrong time... Did she say anything at all about what trouble she might have gotten into or

what she was up to?”

I’m not supposed to talk about that, but it’s hard to remember what’s true and what’s acceptable conversation. I stick to simplicity. “No. No. No idea.”

Esmæ drags in a breath and helps me around the landing. The railing feels slick under my sweating palm, but I think my balance is getting a little better?

It’s a good thing I was talking to my friend here while I was eating, or I’d have ingested even more of the drug before I realized something was wrong.

A giddy smile curves my lips. I’m about to tell Esmæ how wonderful she is when a shriek rings out from above us.

Esmæ’s eyes widen. She freezes, looking torn between fleeing and seeing what’s going on, so I make the decision for her.

If there’s trouble here at the college, that’s exactly what I’m looking for.

I propel myself forward, clambering with an occasional hand braced against the steps up to the next floor. Esmæ catches up with me just as I shove into the hallway.

I stop in my tracks, shocked into something close to sobriety.

Several students are flattened against the walls or their doors, staring at the wreckage on the floor. And it is a wreckage—several marble busts of prominent former professors that were set on display pillars along the hall have been hurled to the floor and smashed to smithereens.

A couple of the students are bleeding, one guy clutching a scratch on his cheek and another a cut on his forearm.

“Gods above,” Esmæ says. “What happened?”

“It must have been a daimon,” the guy gripping his arm says. “Something just blasted down the hall, flinging the statues around.”

A woman swings her head, peering through the hall. “Is it gone? Is it finished?”

Another student shudders where she’s crouched by her door. “They just keep getting worse. Why aren’t the staff doing something to stop them?”

Because they don’t know why it’s happening. Because there’s terrible magic.

Some of it’s in me.

If the gods do look down, if the gods see—

We have to fix this.

My power heaves through my chest, determined to whisk all the statues back into their proper forms and places so no divine figures can get angry. I

only manage to suppress it by throwing myself down as if I've lost my balance.

I smack into the floor, and the external pain sharpens my mind. I hug myself, holding in my magic.

And the backlash wrenches through me like I'm swallowing several shards of broken marble.

At my gasp, Esmæ ducks down beside me. "Ivy! Great God help me. I should get a medic."

"I'll be okay," I rasp out. "Just... just want to get back to my room."

Possibly I should be thanking Anya, or Romild, for giving me an excuse for this sudden fit. Esmæ thinks it's just part of the drug's effect.

But as she helps me back to my feet through the spiraling ache, one thought peels through my scattered mind.

I can't go on like this.

EIGHTEEN



The student feints and then throws a quick punch that my arm whips up to block. I smile at him in what I hope is an encouraging expression, though I'm mainly attempting to encourage myself.

Or more specifically, to encourage my hidden power not to see this sparring session as a legitimate threat.

Just a little friendly exchange of blows for learning purposes. No mortal danger here.

No reason to start thrashing me from the inside out.

Stavros clicks his tongue approvingly and adjusts his student's stance slightly to the left. "You want to leave as little of your body open to attack as possible. You're getting some good power with your strikes, though. You never know when you might lose your weapon in a melee and need to rely on your fists."

The younger man lifts his chin toward me. "And I'd imagine I'd be up against opponents a little more formidable than that."

The derision in his tone only makes me grit my teeth for a moment. I'm getting used to letting noble snobbery and posturing roll off my back.

But Stavros's jaw ticks, and a chill enters his drawl that reminds me of when he held me at sword-point the second time we met. "You'd do best not to underestimate an enemy based on appearances. Or to insult my choice of assistants while I'm standing right here."

The student blanches and draws up a step. He bobs his head toward both of us. "My apologies. Thank you for your help."

I suspect the apology is mainly directed at his professor rather than me,

but I can take a little satisfaction from it all the same. And from the fact that despite said professor's doubts, I have managed not to resort to the sort of dirty street tactics that might have shifted opinion about my formidableness in any of today's mock fights.

Stavros glances at the students arrayed across the field and then nods to me. "I'm taking them back to the classroom now for a brief strategy discussion. You can tidy up here and then take your leisure."

I give a little curtsy in my training leathers just because I think it'll irritate him. "Thank you, sir."

It's not much leisure. By the time I've put away the equipment we were using, I can't imagine I've got more than a half hour before the bell that'll mean I need to get to today's secret meeting.

And I have a task I've been wanting to attend to since yesterday. With Stavros otherwise occupied, it's perfect timing.

Alek's book didn't include detailed instructions on how the prospective kings of old took their pipe fleece. Examining the dried leaves in the packet the shopkeeper gave me, I decided tea was the safest bet.

I swing by the dining hall to request a cup of hot water from the kitchen staff and hustle up to Stavros's quarters. They're empty, just as I hoped.

I retrieve a couple of the leaves I bought and crumble them over the water. The purple-green bits swirl on the surface, and a thin, slightly sour scent makes me wrinkle my nose.

Maybe I should have asked for some honey too. Oh, well.

Why are you trying the jazfern on yourself? Julita asks.

I figured she'd wonder, so I already have an answer ready. "I'd rather not risk poisoning the whole student body—or going to great lengths to administer this stuff to them all if it does nothing. So I'm going to take a weak dose and see if it has any effect on me or my magic."

She doesn't need to know exactly what that magic is. If my ghostly passenger has wondered why she's never seen me overtly making use of my supposed talents, she doesn't comment now.

While I wait for my tea to steep, I change into my favorite gown. Then I perch on the edge of the sofa-turned-bed and start sipping the tea.

The herbal bite to it makes me wince. I force down a larger gulp to get it over with.

It doesn't matter how awful it tastes. Confining the monstrous urges that trickle out of my soul would be worth just about anything.

I'm halfway through the cup when Stavros strides into the room. I startle with a hitch of my pulse—I'd assumed he'd go straight to the meeting from his classroom.

The scent of the pipe fleece tea must be strong enough for him to get a whiff, because he gives the mug a quizzical glance before lifting his gaze to me. "What in the realms are you drinking—lemon rind mixed with pine needles?"

I make a face even though his assessment of the flavor isn't totally off. "It's a trick my grandmother taught me as a kid. Helps bruises heal."

Julita takes on an arch tone. *He's not going to be happy if you have to admit you lied later.*

I can't answer her, and I'll cross that bridge when I come to it. Unless it'll actually help our larger cause, I definitely don't want the former general thinking about reasons I might be focusing on suppressing magical abilities.

He chuckles like I expected, his eyes flashing with amusement and challenge. "I give you what you've been asking for, and now you're complaining. Where's the appreciation, Thief?"

The nickname doesn't sound quite as insulting in his current tone. And he did offer a little trust by letting me get more involved in his lessons today.

"I have all the appreciation," I say, matching his attitude. "That doesn't mean I want to go around in frothy gowns with my arms all black and blue. A lady can have multiple desires."

He walks over to the cabinet where I've learned he keeps his various prosthetics. "And here I thought you'd take any excuse not to wear those heaps of silk."

I smooth my hand over the skirt of my turquoise dress, not just soft but *clean* thanks to the college's laundry services. "I'm not saying I'll be bringing them back to the fringes with me, but they might have grown on me a little."

Or maybe I'm just enjoying not having the constant sensation of grit against my skin. I might as well appreciate *that* while I can.

"Hmm." Stavros's grin comes out. He twists off the metal hook-like hand he favors for hands-on training out of the harness around his forearm and picks out the clay one that looks the most like an actual hand. "I suppose we could keep you in them for one of the practice sessions and you could play damsel in distress."

I glower at him. "Now that you've finally let me properly participate, are

you just looking for excuses to never do it again?”

“Oh, I’m simply thinking through all the possibilities.” The former general clicks his new hand into place and strolls over to his desk. He pauses there and glances over at me again. “You didn’t do a bad job of it this morning, I’ll admit. You moderated your more questionable tactics rather well.”

Gods above, did the great General Stavros just show *respect* for my combat ability? A smile tugs at my lips with more warmth than I’m sure I want to be feeling.

But hey, a victory is a victory.

“That sounds like an insult wrapped in a compliment, but I’ll take it!” I announce.

Stavros snorts and reaches for a sheaf of papers left off to the side of his desk.

Julita’s laugh rings out through my head. *I knew you two would get along eventually.*

I’m glad someone’s totally happy about it.

I haven’t seen the former general do much in the way of paperwork since I started living in his quarters, though I assume all professors must need to do some, no matter how famous they are. A few times, Stavros has carried notebooks or scrolls off to his bedroom as if they contain matters too sensitive to be left in my reach.

Apparently he’s either decided I’m not a security threat or that there’s nothing all that delicate in these reports, because he squints down at them at his desk now. Squints and gives that odd twitch of his head, holds still and twitches again.

As I down the last of my horrid tea, the corners of his mouth tighten in a faint grimace. It occurs to me that there are obvious consequences of his battle injury that I hadn’t considered before.

I set down the mug and get up from the sofa. “Do you have trouble reading?”

Stavros’s eyes jerk toward me again, darkening at the same time as his voice does. “What?”

“I just—” I motion toward the papers. “Julita told me that your injury affected your sight.”

The former general’s entire stance has stiffened, the tensed muscles bulging beneath his shirt. My pulse stutters.

For a second, I almost forgot just how massive that muscular form of his is, especially compared to my gawky body.

Stavros's tone turns both colder and smoother than when he set his student straight. "I'm failing to see how that's any of your business."

Possibly I've misplaced my sense of self-preservation, or maybe I'm just sick of trying to keep my head down while everyone in this place slings venom at me.

I set my hands on my hips. "I was only going to suggest that *perhaps* if there's nothing horrifyingly confidential in there, I could read them out loud and spare you the trouble. Assist, since that's supposedly my job."

Somehow everything about Stavros manages to harden even more, from his gaze to the set of his jaw. "I don't need any assistance. Julita should also have told you that I can handle my affairs perfectly fine on my own."

Oh, yes, Julita says with a hint of mocking. He gets by just fantastically. Other than when he needs to spend more than five seconds not being a prick to the woman who's keeping me in this world.

A flicker of amusement at her remark must show in my face, because Stavros outright bares his teeth without my saying anything. "Do you have any other helpful suggestions? I'd think carefully about your answer."

The hairs on the back of my neck stand on end. He hasn't moved, hasn't made a single threatening gesture, but I see the ruthless general in him loud and clear.

"No," I say thinly, and clamp my mouth shut before anything more impertinent slips out.

"Good," he snaps. "Then why don't you run along to the meeting, since apparently you're itching for work to do? I'm sure Aleksi has all kinds of things you can read down in the archives."

If he's going to be that way, I suppose I will.

I turn toward the door with a swish of my skirt—something else I'm starting to appreciate about gowns. Tunics just don't swish with any kind of effectiveness. "Good idea. It wouldn't be wise for us to arrive at the same time anyway. Thank you so much for your sage guidance."

And then I get my ass out the door.

He's just a little sensitive about his new deficiencies, Julita says as I push into the stairwell, working on unclenching my jaw. I can't say the prickliness is particularly appealing, but it'd have been much harder to convince him to take up my cause if he hadn't had some kind of sensitive spot I could prod.

Is that why she really turned to Stavros out of all the professors? Not because she thought he was most likely to be able to take on the scourge sorcerers at the college, but because she saw an ideal point of emotional manipulation?

Even though I'm annoyed at the jerk, the thought of her poking at his war wounds—practically literally—gives me a jab of queasiness. Then Julita makes an urgent, wordless sound that draws me up short.

I understand why before she's said a word. A head of shaggy brown hair is just emerging through a doorway on the landing a flight below us.

What's Wendos up to now? Julita mutters.

As far as I can tell, following at a careful distance behind him all the way down to the first floor, all he's up to is walking from his dorm to the classrooms. He turns down the hall that leads to the inner courtyard while I have to veer in the other direction to reach the row of tapestries and the hidden entrance.

Julita keeps murmuring darkly as if to herself. *He's got to be involved somehow. I could keep an eye on him better when our dorms were around the corner from each other.*

"I'd rather eat one of these gowns than try to share a dorm with Anya," I inform her under my breath.

It makes sense that Julita hates the guy so much, but I'm starting to see why the men get that skeptical look on their faces when he's mentioned. She assumes he's up to no good at every turn with nothing to show for it.

What if Wendos really has left his bad childhood decisions behind him? How much can any of us trust Julita's judgment when she's harboring all that past resentment?

As I slip down the stairs through the shadowy magical passage, I shake those worries off as well as I can. There's clearly *something* horrible going on here at the college, or the daimon wouldn't be wreaking havoc.

And whatever it is, we'll all be better off if we can figure it out before their agitation spreads any farther.

It seems I'm not the only one feeling the urgency. I'd guess word about last night's smashed statues has spread—and maybe about my incident in the dining hall too. When I emerge into the glow of the archives room, Julita's other three men are already gathered around the desk.

Alek is standing behind it in a typical pensive pose. Benedikt has hopped up to perch on the corner and is swinging one toned leg breezily as if he

hasn't a care in the world, but the flash of his eyes when he sees me tells me he's still concerned about yesterday.

And Casimir's response makes it clear Benedikt has shared his observations. The courtesan hurries over, his gaze sweeping over me as if checking for lingering clumsiness.

He stops a few feet away and offers one of his gentle smiles. "You're having an even rougher time of it here than I realized. Have you totally recovered from yesterday's incident?"

The wobble that runs through my pulse when he looks at me that way isn't fair. Neither is the sudden urge to close the distance between us and lean right into his warmth.

I don't think he'd push me away. But his compassion isn't for me, not really.

I have to remember that.

Would I even want to be like that man ogling him last night? The thought makes me cringe inwardly.

I force a smile onto my own lips and keep my tone light. "I seem to have pissed some people off without meaning to. But whatever they stuck in my food, it only hit me about as hard as a few rounds of ale. Not as hard as the daimon that ran through the third-floor hallway hit those statues."

Alek winces. "I've gathered that the palace has insisted on a full inquiry after that display. But—"

With a shift in the air behind me, Stavros's smooth voice rolls through the room. "But no one has any solid explanations to offer them. Because *we* still don't have anything remotely resembling proof."

Benedikt glances over at the new arrival. "I had a chat with a couple of the advisor of commerce's lackeys this morning. It seems a supply of solm sap went 'missing' from the harbor a couple of days ago, and no one's been able to determine who took it."

Alek's head jerks around. "That's one of the other substances I saw reference to in relation to the old scourge sorcerers."

The bastard's bastard nods. "Exactly. The schemers must have snatched it up."

Julita shivers. *What are those villains planning now?*

Benedikt turns back to Stavros. "We could try telling the Crown's Watch what Julita's observed and all the other things we've found that add up. The fact that she was murdered says a lot."

Casimir's mouth twists pensively. "Would they listen when she isn't here to tell them directly?" He shoots me an apologetic glance that it's clear is more for my ghostly passenger. "No one else knew her well enough to confirm that Ivy really is hosting her soul. From us, it's only hearsay."

"And with her body vanished, we have no way to prove the murder either," Stavros puts in with a growl. He isn't looking at me at all, but after our discussion upstairs, I'm all right with that.

Now does seem like a good idea to mention that I may have made a slight bit of progress. "There's something new I want to look into. Or someone new."

Alek catches my gaze with a glint of curiosity in his bright brown eyes. The same ridiculous part of me that wobbles over Casimir's smile twinges with the yearning to share a knowing moment with him.

But what I'm going to talk about isn't what he and I discussed the other day anyway.

Benedikt lifts his chin toward me encouragingly. "What've you got, Knives?"

Julita stirs in my head with anticipation. I drag in a breath and decide to get right to it. "One of the law professors is bringing in outer-warder kids dressed up as nobles and taking them around campus. Ster. Torstem. I saw him with one yesterday."

All four of the men stare at me for a few seconds. Stavros ambles toward the desk, his head cocked to one side. "And you know this because of your magical urchin-detecting gift?"

His tone isn't quite as sharp as when he snapped at me in his quarters, but it's still got an edge under the teasing lilt.

I meet his gaze steadily. "Most people around here never seem to look past appearances. You certainly don't know the subtleties of street-rat behavior. Whereas, as you've liked to point out to me, I'm one of them."

"If Ivy says she's sure of what she saw, I think we should believe her," Cas says quietly.

Benedikt twirls a quill he's picked up between his fingers. "What do urchins have to do with scourge sorcery? Maybe Torstem simply likes watching them play dress-up."

"I don't know," I admit. "I just thought it was strange and that we should look into it."

Alek's mouth tightens with a hint of queasiness. "The accounts I've read

of the original scourge sorcerers... Children were some of their favorite targets for increasing their power. Get them sacrificing on the sorcerer's behalf at their dedication ceremony.”

My own stomach flips over. “You think Torstem could be murdering these kids for power?”

Alek holds up his hands. “We can't assume that. The records say that they needed to use supplicants who were close to them—usually family members and friends. People who *could* honestly dedicate the sacrifice of their life to someone else's use honestly, because they were devoted to the sorcerer. I read that there were some who had child after child simply to indoctrinate them all before offering them up...”

He trails off, looking even sicker than before.

I can't restrain a shudder. “This kid definitely wasn't raised by any part of a professor's family.”

“He has one daughter, grown and an advisor for one of the provinces near the capital,” Stavros puts in. “No one's mentioned her missing an exorbitant number of body parts that would indicate even a significant living sacrifice. I don't know about nieces or nephews.”

Benedikt twirls his quill at Alek. “Isn't he the staff leader for at least one of the clubs in your list of the ones that make regular trips off campus?”

Julita pipes up. *Yes, exactly what I thought. And Wendos is all mixed up in it too.*

Alek's eyes cloud with thought. “He has a group of elite law students who he takes on regular trips to the surrounding cities to observe provincial and county legal processes. The entomology club goes on periodic insect-observing and collecting expeditions. And his late wife was originally from Icar—he takes the Silanian-Icarian brotherhood on excursions to towns along the border.”

“So he'd have lots of chances to lead illicit rituals away from the prying eyes of the capital,” I fill in with a grimace, and then add reluctantly, “Julita says Wendos is part of the ‘bug club.’”

The others get that expression like they've smelled cow dung, but then all four gazes turn more intent.

Benedikt fixes his on me with the unsettling impression I'm getting used to that it isn't me he's looking at right now. “Has Jules noticed anything else intriguing since she started traveling around with you on campus?”

Julita sighs. *I wish you could say I have.*

I shake my head. “She’s been pointing out people I should keep an eye on and observations she’s made before, but we haven’t uncovered anything new other than the Torstem thing.”

Disappointment flickers across the men’s faces, but Casimir smooths the moment over in typical graceful fashion. “Whatever exactly is going on, it’s definitely an unusual situation. We need to determine what Ster. Torstem’s intentions are.”

I fold my arms over my chest. “There’s got to be a way to find out where that kid—and any others he’s brought around the school, if he has—came from. Surely he isn’t randomly plucking them off the streets of Slaughterwell or Tangleside.”

Benedikt snaps his fingers. “And if we find out where he got the kid, we can find the kid himself and ask him what Torstem was up to!”

“You want me to abuse my staff privileges again,” Stavros says dryly. “I’ll see what I can discover through my access to faculty records.”

Alek glances around the room. “I might be able to trace some of his connections outside of the school through the general records as well.”

“Don’t go approaching anyone from the fringes without talking to me,” I say, shooting a firm look at all of them. “*Especially* if he’s done something they’re uncomfortable talking about, they’ll only clam up more if some noble starts badgering them. I should handle any inquiries beyond the inner wards.”

Casimir beams at me. “Of course. It only makes sense. That’s why we’re lucky to have you working with us.”

I contain the giddiness his compliment provokes. “We should keep in mind Alek’s point about families too. Are there any staff or students at the college who’ve had spouses, siblings, or children make unusual sacrifices or outright disappear? I assume there are familial records somewhere.”

Benedikt shoots me a grin. “And also good old-fashioned gossip.”

Alek is already turning toward the door to the adjoining rooms. “We do have family trees for many of the prominent lineages...”

An unfamiliar sensation that’s much more than giddiness sweeps through me from head to toe.

They’re listening to me. Taking my suggestions as commands and springing to action.

Like I really am an equal partner in this investigation instead of an unexpected interloper.

I’ve never had a chance to establish anything I could call comradery

before. I had no idea collaborating could feel this *good*.

It's not the closeness I so often craved when I watched Ewalin and her mother bantering by the bee hive... but the sudden wash of warmth fills the same hollow inside.

Then Stavros pops the bubble of my exhilaration with a low chuckle and an offhand jab. "Look at you taking over. I don't know whether we should be thanking you or Julita chatting away in your head."

My spirits plummet as quickly as they lifted. "When something's from Julita, I tell you so," I say tartly, but my gut has twisted.

Will any of them totally believe that?

As if I'd have brought you here if you weren't capable of thinking for yourself, Julita says with a sniff. *You're handling them wonderfully, Ivy. Someone needs to keep them on track.*

I don't know why, but her assessment of the situation only deflates me a little more.

I take a step back from the men. "I'll continue making my own inquiries as I can. It seems like we all have plenty to do now."

So there's no reason for me to linger and continue being reminded of how I'm not really meant to be here at all.

Before I can leave, Casimir brightens as only he can. "The ball will give you—and Julita—plenty of chances to observe both the students and the staff with their guards down."

I hesitate. "You think I should go?"

Benedikt waggles his eyebrows. "You were planning on skipping the biggest party of the month?"

"Well, I don't exactly have a lot of experience with reveling with nobles." Or rather, reveling in general.

Navigating a ball feels like a much higher magnitude of con artistry than handling classwork or a hunt.

"Don't turn tail on us now, Thief," Stavros drawls, so apparently even he expects me to pull this off too.

Alek looks as if the thought of balls makes him feel about as sick as scourge sorcerers carving up their kids does, but he inclines his head too. "It is probably the best opportunity you'll get all month to observe and overhear things people would usually keep hidden."

Julita shifts in the back of my mind with motion that feels almost like a pat on my head. *Don't worry about it. I can talk you through the whole thing.*

It'll be fun!

I have my doubts about that, but I can hardly back down now. "All right. I guess tomorrow I'm going dancing."

Gods help us all.

NINETEEN



As I let her into Stavros's quarters, Esmæ lets out a little gasp. "Oh, it's gorgeous."

Her gaze sweeps over the ballgown I've mostly managed to put on myself—because I didn't want the woman who's somehow become my friend noticing the lack of godlen mark on my front or the scars on my back. I resist the urge to hug myself against her assessment.

The dress *is* gorgeous. When I unfurled it from the package a messenger dropped off a few hours ago, I might have gasped myself.

Translucent swaths of sky blue and seafoam green tumble down across an underlayer of paler blue, giving the impression of gleaming water flowing from my collarbone to my toes. Gold embroidery dances along the waistline and in trickles down the skirt like froth on the water.

Even thinner gauze swirls from my shoulders to my forearms, disguising the knobby elbows that a week of noble food hasn't managed to fill out. Linzi's white ribbon around my bicep only shows faintly through even in the bright lights of the apartment.

A thin silk cloak streams from the back of the neckline nearly to my feet, ensuring my scars are totally concealed.

He thought of everything.

I think I'd have known that Casimir must have picked out this dress even if it hadn't arrived with the hair pin I admired in town tucked into the same bundle. I can't imagine anyone else being that aware of the parts of me I'd prefer to disguise.

To top it off, the overlapping panels of fabric obscure slits that mean I'll

still have access to at least a couple of knives. He might have not just picked it out but had the gown custom-made.

The knowledge sends a bubbly feeling through my chest as if I've already downed a couple of glasses of champagne. I'm not sure I like the sensation.

I'm not sure I could possibly belong in this dress. But here I am.

I smile awkwardly and motion toward my lower back. "I don't know if I've gotten the lacing as tight as it should be." I wasn't going to ask Stavros to lend a hand before he set off to make his own ball preparations elsewhere.

"Let me see..." Esmæ sweeps over in her own gown, a purple one with just a narrow swath of gauze across her otherwise bare shoulders and thick embroidery defining the waistline above the billowing skirt. It's probably more in the current court fashion than my own, but I can't say I give a roach's ass about that.

Why is the one-eyed mouse here again? Julita mutters as Esmæ eases aside the lower part of the cloak to give the ribbons at the small of my back a deft tug.

We already had that argument after Esmæ volunteered when I saw her at breakfast this morning. I pointed out that between Julita and me, I still only have one pair of hands.

And it's a pair of hands that isn't particularly practiced at the beautifying arts.

My ghostly guest couldn't deny that, but it hasn't stopped her from grumbling. I suspect she's a little offended that Esmæ has made more of an effort to be friendly with me than it sounds like she ever did with Julita.

Esmæ ushers me over to the mirror mounted on the wall and slips her fingers into my hair. "That pin goes perfectly with the dress too. We could gather your hair all the way up like this. Or keep it more arranged at the back like this."

"Let's go with that one," I say to the second style, and do my best to hold still while she tucks the strands into an intricate arrangement I could never have accomplished on my own.

Before my eyes, I'm transforming into someone even I could mistake for a noble.

Staring at my reflection, my mouth goes a bit dry. A sour flavor lingers on my tongue—I choked down another cup of pipe fleece tea a half hour ago.

I turn away from the mirror toward Esmæ. "Can I help you with your hair? I don't know any complicated styles, but I'll do my best."

She smiles back at me. “Thank you. I actually like the way you have yours usually—the broader loops with some of it left loose along your shoulders. That would be perfect with this dress.”

“I think I can manage that.”

It’s a damn sight easier pinning whorls of hair when I can see them right in front of me. I fix the strands in place carefully around the tie of her eye patch, hoping I don’t repay my schoolmate with a hairstyle that’ll tumble apart halfway through the dancing.

“It’s nice, you know,” Esmae says abruptly when I’m about halfway through my work. “I mean... I haven’t really had a friend here before. Not someone I could get ready for the balls with and that sort of thing.”

The admission jabs right through the center of me. I’ve never had a friend like that ever in my entire life, unless you count the kids my sister and I used to ramble around with when I was small enough to wear smocks.

Imagining I could be wrapped up in the warmth of Ewalin’s family wasn’t anything like actually having that company. And I can hardly call my grudging allies “friends” even if they saw my uninvited passenger as one.

“You made an exception for me?” I say.

Esmae laughs lightly. “I guess I’ve always been so focused on my studies, I didn’t see the point. But maybe that was silly of me. And... I feel more at ease with you than I usually do with the other students here. It never seems like you’re waiting for an ideal moment to get one up on me.”

I suppose that’s true, even if I am putting on a totally false front about who I am. Her openness leaves me momentarily off-balance.

I offer a little honesty of my own, as much as I can. “I haven’t really had good friends either. I’m grateful you’ve looked out for me.”

Julita makes a faint gagging sound in the back of my head, and I resist the urge to smack her through my new fancy hairdo.

“Anyway,” I add, “there’s nothing wrong with studying. I’ve always believed that the more you can learn, the more you can do.”

Esmae lets out another laugh. “I just want to be able to do enough to impress the palace staff. There’s *got* to be a position for me there. I don’t have any familial connections to give me a leg up.”

I grimace around a twinge of guilt. “Stavros pushed me awfully hard to make sure I could handle being his assistant.”

“Oh, I didn’t mean—I wasn’t thinking of you specifically. I wouldn’t be looking to land a job as assistant to a professor anyway.”

As I step away from her, she sighs and peers at her reflection approvingly. “I want to meet all the people coming in and out of court, travel with the royal family when they move around the provincial palaces, see everything I can of the continent. I never ventured more than a few counties over before I came to the college.”

“I’m sure you’ll manage it,” I say. If nothing else, her determination rings through every word.

She closes her eye just for a second and then shoots me a tighter smile over her shoulder. “I’d better. If I end up having to go home, I know my parents are just waiting to arrange a marriage to whichever blustering merchant in the area they most want to appease at that particular moment.”

Ugh. I offer a little shudder in sympathy. “You can definitely do better than that.”

“I’m getting there. Is this what you want for the rest of your life? Work at the college? Even if your family didn’t want to spare you before, now that you’re here it wouldn’t be much trouble to enroll in classes as well. You could aim for anything.”

If only she knew.

I shrug as if the topic isn’t of all that much importance to me. “I’m glad to be where I am now. It’s a good position. But I’m not married to it if a better opportunity comes along.”

The vague answer feels slimy as it slips off my tongue, with all the things I’m hiding.

Esmæ doesn’t seem to notice. “I suppose that’s a healthy outlook.”

She brandishes a stick and a couple of containers of powder she was carrying with her. “Now let’s see what a little makeup can do for you.”

I raise an eyebrow. “Is that really necessary when we’re all wearing masks?”

The nobles apparently prefer to cover their faces for a little plausible deniability about whatever hijinks they expect to get up to while they party. I guess that means Alek will fit in better than usual.

Esmæ grins. “That’s why we focus on the eyes and the mouth. I’ve never even seen your face powdered. I’m sure we could bring a little more color into it...”

She stands between me and the mirror as she works, patting a cool sponge all over my face and then applying color with brushes of varying sizes.

The cosmetics don’t feel as heavy as I expected, but maybe Esmæ just

has a light touch.

When she steps back, I stare at myself. *Now I look like a noble.*

I look like a stranger.

My cheeks have a rosy tint that's unfamiliar on my sallow skin. A deeper ruddy tone makes my lips look fuller.

But it's my eyes that stand out the most, kohl frames and shaded lids turning the bright blue irises piercing.

Esmæ clicks her tongue. "It's a shame we'll have to cover most of that up. Could you line my eye? It's always hard when I only have the one to see with."

I can at least offer a steady hand if not one that's wielded kohl often in the past. "Of course."

Once she's satisfied with herself as well, we help each other fasten our simple masks over our upper faces—hers a purple lace that matches her dress, mine a sleek gold imprinted with a subtle lattice pattern that Casimir must have picked out to coordinate with my gown's embroidery. It brings out the red in my hair, as he may have counted on as well.

It's a perfect disguise. I'm going to mingle with Florian's elite while they drink and cavort—and do my best to be in the right place to overhear secrets spilled with a slip of a tongue.

Even Julita sounds pleased, despite Esmæ's assistance. *You're doing me proud, Ivy. Now let's get out there and track these scourge sorcerers down.*

We only have one flight to ascend to reach the ballroom. It takes up most of the space on the fifth floor, under the building's broad dome.

As we step through the doorway, I stop my jaw from dropping only with sheer force of will. I've always known the nobles went for extravagance, but this... This is as if the godden of beauty herself touched the space with her blessing.

Crystal chandeliers twinkle at varying heights across the arced ceiling, which looms so far above our heads they look like clusters of stars. Their glow beams down across the otherwise darkened dance floor in iridescent streams. I can't tell whether the crystals themselves give the light that pearly quality or if it's the result of someone's gift.

Flashes of color slip in and out of those glowing beams as nobles in billowing dresses and velvet suits of every hue in existence circulate through the room. Staff in formal but subdued black suits circulate between them with platters of bubbling glasses that hold their own, definitely magical glow.

The music seems to wind alongside them, coursing from every corner of the room with its lilting melody. I can't see the performers. Are there dozens of them or only a few projecting their music through the vast space?

More magical décor glimmers around the edges of the room: pink roses for Ardone and orange blossoms for Inganne, gliding swans and fluttering butterflies.

One of the waiters breezes by us with a tray, and Esmæ snatches up a glass. I decide I'm better off keeping my head as clear as possible.

The very atmosphere in the ballroom tastes like a drug. And I remember far too well how my control started to slip in the grips of whatever Anya or Romild slipped in my dinner the other night.

I drift forward, searching the figures with their gilded masks for any features I can recognize. My gaze halts on a towering figure near the edge of the crowd who's staring right back at me.

There's no mistaking Stavros, even in a suit twice as fancy as anything I've seen him wear before and his realistic prosthetic hidden by a glove. No one else has a frame quite that massive to fill out the deep green jacket and trousers to such impressive effect.

No one else has that shock of blood-red hair turned even ruddier in contrast with the green.

He's wearing a gold mask too, to match the ample detailing on his jacket, a few shades yellower than his light brown skin. The shape of it is sharper than mine, though, with a definite masculine edge.

And his eyes bore into mine from across the room, refocused with that subtle twitch of his head, leaving no doubt that he's recognized me too. Between the fractured lighting and the mask, it's hard to read his expression, but his normally nonchalant posture has stiffened.

His lips part with a flick of his tongue over them that sends an unwelcome waft of heat crackling over my skin. Then he turns away as if he never saw me.

Of course. I'm not here to talk to *him*.

He was probably just startled to see me looking so little like a thief.

Come on, let's get in there, Julita says impatiently, and I venture farther into the mass of nobles.

Skirts brush against mine, and laughter bounces alongside the music. I think I spot Anya's pale hair off to my right, but she's whirled away an instant later by her current dancing partner.

I sidle closer to a cluster of figures gabbing between sips of wine. All I hear them exchanging are judgments of the outfits of those outside their group.

Farther along, I catch one male student making a remark about a dagger to his friends. When I linger, it turns out he's describing an ornamental piece his father is having made for his birthday, encrusted with gems.

Gold and jewels gleam everywhere—along belts, around necks, on fingers. In my hair.

So much wealth in one room, it could see every family on the fringes raised out of squalor for a year or better.

And I'm here marinating in it rather than bringing the people I considered *my* family their dues.

I let myself wander out of the crowd at the other end of the room and take a moment to rest my hand against the wall and close my eyes. The lights seem to keep swaying through my eyelids.

I'm here for those people. Here to make sure they don't get burned up in retribution for crimes they could barely conceive of. That's more important than leaving a few coins on a windowsill.

But in that moment, I can't help feeling I'm getting nowhere at all.

When I open my eyes again, I notice Alek standing several feet away, also hanging back by the wall. It's easy enough to recognize him when he's stuck with his usual leather mask, which gleams softly beneath the chandeliers.

His stance is uneasy, like he doesn't feel he fits in here any more than I do. But if I hadn't already thought there was plenty striking about his penetrating eyes, his dark hair, and those full lips, seeing him in ball getup would have shocked the realization into me. He's either got some fashion sense or a friend who does, because the crimson jacket sets off his bronze skin to impressive effect.

Hopefully I'm not ogling him *too* openly, because in the middle of my assessment, he glances over at me. He draws himself up a little straighter, his jaw working.

I'm about to smile, because it feels like I should acknowledge him somehow, but then he's striding off around the room in the opposite direction.

Two out of two turning their back on me so far. I'm obviously making a fabulous impression.

The music dips as one melody blends into a more languid one. My gaze snags on Casimir's tawny hair in the mass of dancers, just stepping away from a woman I don't recognize whose ebony ringlets are gathered in a sphere of curls on her head.

My stomach wobbles, but not in a good way.

I jerk my attention to the side and start to slink back into the crowd on a course that won't take me toward him. But I've made it less than ten paces when a steady but gentle hand closes around my elbow.

"There you are. Oh, that gown did turn out impressively, didn't it?"

I spin toward the courtesan, who's grinning at me from behind a silver mask dotted with sapphires much like the gems standing in for some of his back teeth.

You'd think the lesser metal would make him look shabby compared to all his classmates sporting gold. But with the midnight-blue of his suit and the silvery sheen to his dress shirt beneath, he looks like he could be a godlen of the night sky rather than any kind of mortal.

My pulse stutters, and I lose track of my voice. "I— Thank you. For the dress. And the hair pin. I told you—"

"I know what you told me." Casimir touches my chin with just enough pressure to tilt it slightly upward, but the contact sends a flush straight down my chest. "And you've elevated the gown beyond what it was on its own. You're stunning, Ivy."

It's literally his job to make people happy, so I doubt he entirely means that. But it makes my heart skip another beat anyway.

"Aren't we supposed to be pretending we barely know each other?" I can't help asking.

He makes a dismissive sound. "We're incognito. Besides, I'm simply a schoolmate struck by an incredible beauty wandering by."

His smile widens, and the hand on my arm slides down to twine his fingers with mine. "You're not going to deny me the chance to fully appreciate our handiwork, are you? One dance won't hurt anyone."

It's hard to argue with his warmly cajoling tone. And his "our" melts something inside me, even though I know he and Esmæ deserve the lion's share of the credit for however good I do look.

"I didn't realize it came with additional conditions," I say tartly as I let him set his other hand on my waist.

Casimir chuckles. "You're allowed to say no. But you could think of it as

part of your cover. It'll look odd if you come to a ball and never dance.”

He does have a point.

I set my hand awkwardly on the lapel of his jacket. “I don't know any of these dances, so trying might actually be worse.”

“That's all right. I've trained to be an excellent partner. We'll stick to a simple one. Just follow my lead.”

The mention of his partnering ability reminds me of the woman I saw him with a few moments ago.

My throat constricts, but I force myself to ask, “Are you not hired for the ball?”

The courtesan shakes his head without any sign that he's bothered by the question. “I approach these events as an opportunity for potential patrons to sample my talents.”

My cheeks prickle with a hotter flush from before. “I wouldn't—”

Casimir's voice softens. “I know. This is simply a dance between friends.”

Are we friends, really?

That's not a question I can ask. It's impossible at least as much because of who I am as who he is.

He steps to the side so smoothly that my feet move automatically to follow. It only takes a few paces, charting a careful circle across the floor, before the rhythm of the music melds with our movements in my head.

After a minute, I've relaxed enough to try to match his cross-steps. My hand eases up to rest on his shoulder.

Casimir guides me a little closer to him, and his honeyed sandalwood scent drifts over me. My body tingles with awareness of the few inches left between us—of the sinewy muscles responsible for his feline grace. Of his gaze on me, even now.

I lift my head to meet it, but that might not have been the wisest plan. He smiles down at me, our feet still moving in tandem, and seeing his stunning face so close knocks most of the breath from my lungs.

I find myself saying the first words that pop into my head, as unwise as they might be. “Do you normally have much time to do things that aren't about pleasing patrons or learning how to?”

Nearly everything I've heard him talk about that isn't to do with me and investigating the conspiracy has revolved around his work.

Casimir shrugs. “It's a fairly immersive calling. But I spend time with

classmates I consider friends.” His mouth slants a little, giving a bittersweet cast to his smile. “Although as we branch out into taking on patrons ourselves, a certain level of competition has added tensions.”

My heart squeezes in sympathy for the hint of loneliness I catch in those words.

My dance partner doesn’t give me the chance to express it. He whirls us around, his hand on my waist firming to ensure I keep up.

“I know you’re a reader, but not what sorts of things,” he says. “Sprawling histories? Fanciful imaginings?”

He’s shifting the focus back on me—my interests, my desires.

I swallow thickly before I answer. “Both of those and pretty much anything else I can get my hands on. It’s all interesting one way or another. But I suppose I enjoy tales of adventures the best—real and fictional.” I’ve already devoured the first volume of Gisela Luvinya’s *Traveling Diaries*.

I’m not going to let Casimir act as if it’s only my concerns that matter, though. I give his shoulder a light squeeze. “What about you? Are you a frequent visitor of the library?”

His smile turns slightly sheepish. “I can’t say so. I’m passable with composing poetry, but the written word isn’t a great strength of mine.”

He tips his head with the melody lilting around us. “Of all the arts, I prefer music. Perhaps someday I’ll have the chance to play my flute for you.”

That’s always what he’s thinking of, isn’t it? How he can gratify everyone else.

Even now... With every movement, he’s adapting to my inexperience with incredible grace, probably making me look like twice as good a partner as I actually am.

How incredible would *he* look if he didn’t have to hold himself back so I could keep up?

Even if he sees this as only a friendly dance, how am I using him any less than all the patrons who at least are paying him?

I start to pull back. “You shouldn’t need to keep propping me up.”

Casimir catches me before I can go far. He studies my expression from behind his mask.

“That’s not how I see this,” he says. “Not at all.”

He brings my hand that he’s holding to his waist and releases it so he can brush his fingers over my cheek, tracing the line of my mask. “We’re incredibly lucky you found your way to us, Kindness.”

My pulse flutters all over again. I have the sudden impulse to bob up on my toes and kiss him, which only makes my face flare with embarrassed heat.

He wouldn't want— It'd only remind him of the woman he *really* wanted and lost—

My lips part while my mind scrambles for some dry remark to break the intensity of the moment.

And the chandelier over our heads explodes in a hail of crystal shards.

TWENTY



At the first burst of sound, it's hard to say who reacts first. Casimir and I yank each other toward the floor in tandem.

Chips of crystal pelt our hair and backs. The courtesan sucks in a startled breath, his arms wrapping tighter around me. "What under the—"

His exclamation is lost in the cracking sound of at least a dozen more chandeliers bursting apart. Cries and shouts reverberate through the vast room, mostly in confusion, but a few laced with what sounds like pain.

My nerves jitter beneath my skin with the sense of something unearthly whipping past us. More than one something.

"The daimon," I murmur. "They're lashing out again."

And they're not finished with us.

I dare to raise my head, just in time to see one of the larger shards that fell to the polished floorboards leap from the ground on a supernatural current. It whips straight at my face.

I jerk down again, swallowing a yelp as its sharp edge slices across my hairline at my temple. The cries around us are taking on a panicked tone.

The daimon aren't satisfied with just frightening us tonight. They're aiming to hurt.

"Ivy?" Casimir says, and flicks his hand down his front in a hasty gesture to the divinities. "Keep your head low. We—we should try to find some kind of shelter."

He sounds so worried about *me*, as if he isn't in just as much danger as I am. Self-defense lessons for nobles could hardly have prepared him for an assault like this.

A choking sensation rises up from my chest. I can't let the raging spirit-creatures harm him—not the man who's been so fucking kind from the moment I stepped into this place.

So kind he even sees kindness in me.

Esmæ is out there in the room somewhere too—and Alek and Benedikt, and gods smite me, I'd even care if Stavros was lanced through with a chunk of crystal.

If anyone's getting to stab him, I've got first dibs.

I can't speak for the rest of the arrogant pricks in this place, but there are at least a few who don't deserve this punishment. A few who are trying to fix what the daimon are seething about.

A punch of energy smacks against my ribs from the inside, pounding to get free alongside the thud of my pulse. My magic almost escapes me in my next ragged breath.

My entire body tenses against it instinctively. A shudder ripples through my muscles, my jaw aching as I clamp it against the urge.

Oh, gods, setting my power loose would only make things worse.

There are other things I can do. I *do* have experience with being under attack in unruly and unpredictable ways.

Even as my eyes water with the strain of suppressing my power, my mind darts through my memory of the room.

Casimir had the right idea when he mentioned shelter. There were tables and chairs set up along the sides of the room, places for nobles who no longer felt like dancing to lounge about and grab refreshments.

Something else in the room crashes. A whimper reaches my ears through the thunder of frantic footsteps.

Soon we'll be as likely to get trampled as stabbed.

I dig my fingers into Casimir's jacket and propel the words from my constricted throat. "Run for the wall to our right. We'll get under a table."

Casimir inhales shakily and nods. We ease off our knees together and dash toward the nearest wall through the milling bodies.

A flung shard scratches my wrist. Casimir gives a hitch of breath that suggests one struck him too.

The tamped magic inside me lurches against my inner hold.

I wrench it back with fraying threads of control, and agony bursts through my frame. In an instant, every organ is burning, every bone throbbing.

I stumble amid the panicked crowd, and Casimir tugs me onward. "We're

almost there. I've got you."

Does he have any clue why I've actually faltered? Every step sends fresh jolts of pain up my legs.

A girl who isn't looking where she's going collides with us. The impact jolts me out of my agonized stupor long enough to rasp at her, "Get down, get to the tables!"

She keeps her head enough to yell out my message to everyone else around. "Move toward the tables!"

Casimir lets out a sharp hiss, and my head jerks around with the fear that I'll find him badly injured. Instead, my gaze stops where his has, on a body sprawled in our path.

It's a nobleman who can't have been older than me, his pale blue suit jacket and white dress shirt darkened by a bloody splotch. A shard of crystal protrudes from his throat.

The horrible sight gives me a fresh rush of resolve.

"To the tables," I holler as loud as I can pitch my voice. "Use them as shields! Get out of the open!"

Another woman sways toward us, blood streaming from a deep cut on her thigh. I grasp her elbow, and the three of us stagger the last several steps to the nearest table.

I drag my companions under it. Casimir reaches up to help me shove it over from beneath.

Platters crash and desserts splatter the floor, but now we've got a thick barrier between us and any bits of crystal the daimon kick up off the ground.

"What's wrong with them?" the woman beside me wails, clutching her leg.

I tear a strip of satin off her opulent gown and do my best to tie it around the wound. "They're upset about something."

Something I can't admit I know about. Shit and smittings, this is bad.

The second I stop moving, stop actively helping, the power inside me thrashes harder. I bite down on a groan and peer over the edge of the table at the chaos still reigning in the room behind.

With most of the chandeliers shattered, the light is even hazier than before. The edges of the mask block my peripheral vision, so I tear that off and toss it aside.

Some of the ball-goers have managed to get to the other tables and duck beneath or behind them, but far from all of them. Silhouetted figures race this

way and that.

As I watch, a woman spasms in mid step. She reels around and topples over, her hands grasping wildly at a thin spear of crystal that's pierced right into her gut.

My magic sears through my insides. I can't hold back a whine of distress. When I'm in action, when I'm doing something, that makes it easier.

I push past the table legs.

Casimir snatches after me. "Ivy, what are you—"

"I've got to help!" I shout over my shoulder, and throw myself back into the fray.

I scramble through the weaving bodies and manage to haul one woman I don't know over to the shelter of a table. Then I stumble on a nobleman bent over his friend, who's bleeding from a shard that might have nicked the guy's heart.

"Let's get him out of the way!" I say over the rising screams and yells for help.

The injured man's friend gives a wobbly nod and helps me drag him off to the side of the room. The man groans, which at least means he's still alive.

I leave them huddled there and whirl to face the rest of the ballroom again, my hands clenched tight at my sides. Pain keeps spiking through my innards, but I can tune it out enough to keep going while I'm focused on the task at hand.

That cursed pipe fleece obviously does shit-all to dampen riven magic. The demanding power inside me feels just as potent as it always has.

Or would it be even worse right now if I hadn't been drinking that tea yesterday and today?

Figures in blue uniforms have appeared near the doorway. Members of the Crown's Watch and maybe other guards as well. They're waving their hands around, but I can't make out what they're saying from here.

I dart onward and nearly bump into a couple of familiar figures.

Wendos is just spinning around with a swish of his shaggy hair to jab an accusing finger toward Romild. "What were you doing? I saw you."

Romild stares back at him, her face pale except for a dribble of blood down her lower lip where it was either cut or she bit through it. "I— What are you talking about?"

I'd stop to find that out myself, but just then another half a dozen crystal splinters flash through the air farther ahead of me. "Watch out!" I holler,

sprinting toward the dazed nobles in their path.

As I shove one of them out of the way, another lets out a grunt that sounds more like surprise than alarm. I brace for one of the shards to scrape over me, but no further pain comes.

When I glance around, the bits of crystal are pattering to the floor as if released by the invisible force that was directing them.

The soldiers are spreading through the room. A couple of them are close enough now for me to pick up the low, rhythmic chant they're intoning. A wave of soothing magic rolls through my nerves.

It's not meant for me, though. They must be doing something to subdue the daimon.

No more chandeliers shatter. The scattered wreckage that the furious spirits turned into makeshift blades doesn't rise again.

"Everyone who's uninjured, return to your dorms and quarters," one of the guards calls out. "Clear the room so the medics can find those who need them."

I cautiously ease upright, my gown fluttering around me. The gauze on my right arm was torn somewhere in the chaos; the flowing skirt is now flecked with scarlet as well as gold.

But other than a faint stinging from the shallow scratches on my forehead and wrist, I seem to have made it through undamaged.

I don't know if I can say the same for anyone else who matters to me here. I pivot on my feet, scanning the unsteady nobles as they drift toward the doorway, but I can't make out any faces I recognize now.

Before I can take more than a couple of steps back toward the table where I left Casimir, one of the soldiers blocks my path. She points toward the door. "Out of the room. Calmly but quickly."

"I'm just looking for—"

"You can find whoever you need once you're out of the ballroom. If they're injured, the medics will take care of them."

Not if they're worse than injured.

The images of the fallen bodies flicker through my mind, but the soldier's face doesn't offer any room for argument. Even thinking about challenging her authority sets off a fresh flare of my magic's internal assault.

I grit my teeth and bob my head in acknowledgment.

As I head for the door, I scan all the figures around me, but I reach the hall without having spotted Esmæ or any of Julita's men. My stomach knots.

It's possible they got out ahead of me. Stavros could have already returned to his quarters.

He's staff—if any of them know what's going on, who was hurt and who wasn't, it'll be him.

The hopeful thought propels me through the jostling crowd and down the packed stairwell. I push out into the fourth-floor hallway and speed up to a jog, grateful that current noble fashion leans toward flat slippers rather than anything with built-up heels.

I press my bracelet to the carved door and then shove it open.

But as I tread into the dark room beyond, I can tell it's empty. It doesn't look as if Stavros has been in here since I left with Esmæ for the ball.

I stand in the middle of the room for several beats of my heart, feeling adrift. A frown crosses my face.

The men aren't the only people I've lost track of. My ghostly passenger hasn't made a peep since the daimon's assault started.

"Julita?" I say tentatively into the silence of the room.

No answer. Not even a stirring in the back of my head. I can't even tell whether I can still sense her presence there. I could be imagining the faintest of tickles, or it could just be the buzz of my uneasy thoughts.

"Julita!" I say again, as if she might be so far away she didn't hear me the first time.

No answer. What's happened to her?

Did the attack or the daimon's magic dislodge her somehow?

I've wanted my mind back from the first moment she spoke up in it, but a lump clogs my throat. Right now, I need the company.

I sag onto the sofa. There's no way for me to find the men. I don't even know where the other three's dorms are.

All I can do is wait here for Stavros to return... or for someone to come tell me he won't be returning at all.

As much of an asshole as he can be, I can't help wishing that I trusted the gods. Because if I did, I'd send up a prayer that it won't be the latter.

TWENTY-ONE



Linzi skips ahead of me through the park. Her pale red hair flashes in the sunlight.

Ma said she had to stick with me. She's only little—two years littler than I am. She shouldn't run off on her own.

"Linzi!" I call after her, dashing after her. My feet slip on the dew-slick grass.

I'm falling. I thrust my hands out to catch my balance, and Linzi whirls around—and somehow my palms are slamming straight into her chest.

Clouds whirl above our heads, blotting out the sun. Her fragile body erupts, her back bowing. Her head snaps to the side as her arms flail.

A crack forms right down the middle of her. Darkness seems to be pouring from my fingers into her, tearing her more and more open by the second.

Her blood spills over my hands.

"No! No, no, please, no!" I cry, but I can't yank my hands away. I can't move at all.

Her skin sloughs off and her flesh gleams a red so much starker than her hair. Her lips part in a silent scream.

And I keep battering her with the poisonous power I can't haul back.

I can't stop it.

I have to.

I can't.

I—

A tug on my shoulder wrenches me out of the nightmare.

I gasp into the darkness, aware of nothing but a vague form leaning over me, and my hand flies to my thigh automatically. I whip my knife up to brace against the intruder's throat.

And realize it's not an intruder at all.

With another blink, my vision adjusts to the thin light seeping through the room from the window at the far end. Stavros glowers down at me, poised over my body, his mouth slanted into a grimace that might hold a hint of amusement too.

He's shed the fancy jacket he was wearing at the ball, his white dress shirt partly unbuttoned down his sculpted chest. I'd admire the view if my wits hadn't scattered.

His much larger hand closes around my own where it's gripping the knife. The knife that's dug into his neck deep enough to produce a droplet of blood against the light brown skin.

"Hello to you too," he says dryly. "I see you made it through the onslaught of daimon with your impressive fighting instincts intact."

I gape at him for a few seconds longer than is strictly polite, my mind shaking off the dregs of sleep. I'm sprawled out on the sofa but still wearing my silk dress, no blanket over me.

I must have drifted off while I was waiting for him to get back.

And wandered into that awful dream.

I pull my hand back, and Stavros lets it go. Inhaling sharply, I scoot toward the sofa's arm to pull my stance upright and tuck the knife back into its hidden sheath. "Sorry. I— Old habits."

Stavros shrugs and sits down on the far end of the sofa, now vacated by my feet. "If it'd been anyone other than me prodding you here in the middle of the night, it'd have been a perfectly valid response."

He pauses, his dark eyes going momentarily somber as they search mine. "I'd have left you to your sleep, but you sounded as though you weren't enjoying it very much."

Damn, was I acting out my anguish in real life? And of course the former general had to be the one to see it.

"Bad dream," I say shortly, and swipe quickly at my eyes to make sure no tears leaked out. I seem to be okay there. "I wanted to talk to you as soon as you got back anyway. Is everyone else okay?"

"I managed to get confirmation that Casimir, Aleksii, and Benedikt are all in decent shape. I'd have been able to tell you that sooner, but I went to speak

to the king.”

I blink at him one more time, even though my eyes have totally adjusted now. “You just walked over to the palace and demanded an audience with King Konram in the middle of the night?”

The corners of Stavros’s mouth twitch upward. “Having until very recently been his very favorite general comes with a few benefits. I thought— Clearly the daimon are escalating their distress faster than we can unravel the problem. I had a duty to warn him even if I didn’t have much to warn him with.”

My pulse hitches. He didn’t just have a chat with the king—he told him about the scourge sorcerers. “And what did he say?”

Stavros’s grimace comes back. “That I didn’t have much. He can’t stamp out sorcerers we haven’t identified. He didn’t even sound totally convinced that there *is* scourge sorcery being practiced at the college based on the little I could tell him.”

I scowl. “What does he think the daimon are riled up about, then? It’s not like they typically trash the college balls, is it?”

“No.” Stavros rubs his brow, ruffling the fringe of his ruddy hair. “Apparently there are rumors going around that the disturbances are a sign that the godlen themselves are unhappy with Silana on a broader scale. That they’re giving us a chance to reform.”

“Reform how? What are they pissed off about if it’s not scourge sorcery?”

“Obviously, no one knows. I pointed out to him that it being a reaction to a small group of miscreants makes much more sense than there being some horrible wrong we’re all doing that we don’t even know about, but he wasn’t fully swayed. I think he was annoyed that I hadn’t mentioned the sorcery concern earlier.”

Which Stavros obviously realized was likely. But he put himself out there anyway.

He doesn’t look as if he regrets the decision, but I roll my eyes toward the ceiling on his behalf. “So he was peeved that you didn’t have enough information, but also peeved that you didn’t come to him when you had even less.”

“That’s about the size of it.”

“What a knob.”

A startled guffaw sputters out of Stavros. “Yes, I suppose he can be.”

He peers at me again, with the head-twitch to refocus his vision, and his gaze darkens. He lifts his hand to hover his fingers by my forehead. “You’re injured.”

At the protective growl that’s come into his voice, my heart skips a beat for a very different reason.

I put on a breezy tone. “It’s just a couple of scratches.”

“A *couple*?”

I raise my wrist with its thin line of dried blood before he insists on conducting his own search. “I’ve had worse papercuts.”

Stavros mutters something insulting about the daimon and then thumps his false hand against the back of the sofa. “I’m making sure you see a medic first thing in the morning. And we’re only waiting until the morning because I don’t imagine there are any who can be spared yet.”

A shiver travels down my back. “I came across at least a couple of people they won’t have been able to do anything for.”

“Yes.”

A crackle of emotion runs through that word. The former general glowers across the room at something I suspect he can only see in his head.

His attention slides back to me. “I saw you running around in the fray. Looking like you were aiming to get more than a couple of papercuts.”

I grimace at him. “I was trying to help.”

One corner of his mouth curls upward. “I could tell. It was more than I saw any of my blasted students doing, for all their training. You might have saved a few of the dolts’ lives.”

I don’t know what to do with the warmth that’s crept into his voice. So, inanely, I find myself defending those dolts. “No one would have trained them to fight off rampaging daimon.”

“You figured it out somehow.”

“I just... I had to do something.” I look down at my hands and then back at him. “If the king isn’t listening, then what do we do *now*?”

Stavros leans against the back of the sofa, stretching his well-muscled legs out in front of him. “There isn’t much we can do other than what we’ve already been doing. The royal family can be more alert to the threat now. They’re dispatching extra guards to patrol the college—soldiers with gifts that should help calm the daimon if we need protection.”

More protection for everyone else. More chances of someone discovering why *I* should be put to death for me.

I swallow thickly. “Wonderful. Well, I didn’t have much opportunity to ferret out any secrets tonight considering how quickly the daimon crashed the party, but I’ll get right back to it in the morning. Whenever my official assistance isn’t needed.”

It occurs to me a half second too late that my last flippant remark could be taken as a jab. I hesitate, not sure if I should apologize.

I didn’t do anything wrong in the first place. But it’s dangerous to be on this man’s bad side.

To my shock, Stavros beats me to it.

He looks at his sprawled legs and then at me, with that tiny twitch to get a better focus on my face. “I appreciate your dedication to the cause. And your ‘official assistance’ has been better than I expected. I shouldn’t have snapped at you yesterday. It was a reaction unworthy of my training, and I’ll make sure it doesn’t happen again.”

For what seems like the third time in as many minutes, I find myself staring at him.

A more typical grin crosses his lips. “You’ll make me feel even more like a lout if you keep looking at me like that. I might be an ass, but I’m fully capable of apologizing for it after the fact.”

I let out a bemused huff, still lost for words. Where’s Julita when I need her to guide me through this awkward conversation with a man she knew far better than I did?

Really, where’s Julita at all?

The reminder of her absence—and the thought of how this man and the others will react if she’s gone for good—chills me. I push those worries aside and focus on the peace offering Stavros has extended.

I can be a good enough sport to partly return the favor.

“I can understand it must be a difficult subject for you,” I venture.

“Yes. Well.” Stavros gazes vaguely across the room. His hand comes to rest on my ankle where my feet are tucked near him, buried in the folds of my gown, but he shows no sign he’s noticed he even made the gesture.

From his expression, I’m not sure he’s here at all.

“Both my mother and my father served as generals under King Dobri—Konram’s father—for more than twenty years, you know,” he says after a moment, his tone both light and bittersweet. “And both ultimately died as all glorious generals do, defending Silana. I knew I was going to follow in their footsteps from the moment I knew anything at all. I picked my gift to be of as

much use in the field as possible. I made my sacrifice happily.”

He lowers his gaze to his other hand, the one currently a realistically sculpted replica. The warmth of his touch tickles up my leg.

“What was the gift?” I ask quietly, not wanting to break the moment.

“I can see a few moves ahead. The next several seconds, in a one-on-one fight. Sometimes several minutes, when observing the patterns of an entire army. Or rather, I *could* see. It requires a certain amount of sustained concentration that my eyes are no longer capable of. So here I am, whiling out the rest of my days teaching Silana’s elite how to fight the battles I can’t.”

The bitter overrides the sweet in that last sentence.

He gives himself a little shake and pushes his mouth into a grin stiffer than the one before. “I’m still serving my country. No more damp tents and stale camp food! There’s plenty to recommend about the academic life.”

His mock-jovial tone doesn’t fool me for a second. He hates that he’s here—he hates that he’s lost the life he gave so much to.

No wonder he acts like such a prick sometimes.

I don’t even know what that feels like. I never had a chance to make real dreams to lose.

But I can honestly say, with an ache in the pit of my stomach, “I’m sorry.”

Stavros glances down and appears to realize for the first time that he’s rested his hand on my leg. As he lifts his gaze to meet mine, he strokes his thumb over my ankle. An absent, totally casual gesture that sets off a flare of heat straight to my core.

“You’ve got nothing to be sorry for, Ivy of wherever you’re actually from,” he says in the languid tone I’m used to. “You’ve at least made recent days a little more interesting.”

He shakes his head, and a hint of the bitterness comes back. “The real problem is that I’m *here*, and we’re fighting our own kind of war right now, and I still couldn’t win it before innocent people got killed.”

He’s trying to sound flippant about it, but his frustration prickles through. As much as he can be an asshole and an arrogant jerk, I can’t deny how much he cares about the people he meant to spend his whole life defending.

Even though I get a pang of loss when I slip my leg from beneath his fingers, I adjust my position so I’m leaning close enough to him to set my hand on his shoulder. “It took the whole host of godlen and the All-Giver on top of that to end the first bunch of scourge sorcerers. I hope your ego isn’t so

big you expect to equal them.”

Stavros lets out a bark of a guffaw and turns to me with a flash of his dark eyes. “I suppose it can’t get there with you around to pop holes in it.”

When he looks at me like that, heat sweeps through my entire body. My skin tingles with the awareness of just how little space remains between us now.

It would be ever so easy to lean even closer and—

My body sways, and a jolt of panic washes away the flush of desire.

I jerk myself backward, covering my lapse with a straightening of my skirts as if I’m simply tired of being smothered by them.

Great God help me, I almost *kissed* him. The man who’d probably laugh while the executioner fixed a noose around my neck.

“It’s been a long night,” I say, keeping my voice as even as possible. “We should probably both get some sleep.”

Stavros hesitates, and for one anxious moment, I think he’s going to ask what’s wrong. Instead, he pushes to his feet. “Of course. I’ll let you get back to it. Don’t let the daimon haunt your dreams anymore. They’re settled down for now.”

I let out a rough chuckle. I’m not going to tell him what I was really dreaming about.

About the first person my riven magic ever killed.

“If they turn up, I’m sure I can simply stab them,” I say, and Stavros echoes my laugh.

I sit still until he’s vanished into his bedroom. My burst of panic has spread into a duller chill of fear that’s wrapping around me.

What the fuck is wrong with me? First I’m mooning over Casimir at the ball, then I’m falling all over the former general?

I enjoyed the impression of having earned his trust. I wanted to find out what it’s like to kiss him.

Just like I wanted to melt into Casimir’s arms and pretend I was the only one he’d want to dance with.

But I know, I *know* that’s all impossible.

What am I doing here? Running around playing noble while the daimon are bringing the ceiling down on our heads?

My heart’s getting tangled up with men who see me as a vessel for the woman they really cared about at best... And who’ll consider me a monster as vile as the ones we’re tracking down at worst, if they find out the truth.

Fragments of images from the ball flicker up from my memory. The shrieks, the blood, the milling bodies...

The bodies no longer moving, sprawled lifeless on the floor.

Like Linzi. Like my poor little sister, torn through.

By my own wretched hands.

A clammy sweat breaks out down my back. What if that dream was a sign—a warning?

I ruin things. I know that even when I'm asleep.

Have I actually helped the fight against the scourge sorcerers? Maybe I've been inadvertently leading Julita's men astray with my theories and assumptions.

I thought I could write myself a new role as hero, but what did I really accomplish while the daimon lashed out and people *died*?

The only way I'm not going to ruin everything here is if the men I've allied myself with destroy me first.

Or I could just go. I could disappear back into the streets of the fringes, be no one but the unknown "Hand of Kosmel," and the men would never find me.

Go back to where I belong, where I understand the rules. Leave this entire blasted headache behind.

The chill sinks in so deep I can hardly breathe. I shove myself off the sofa and stare at the door.

It's that easy. Wouldn't it be so much better for all of us?

My legs propel me to the door. My fingers rest on the handle, my ears pricked for any sounds of movement in the hall beyond or the bedroom behind me.

A familiar tickle stirs in the back of my head. *Ivy? What are you doing?*

My heart nearly jumps out of my chest. I jerk my hand back to my side.

"Julita?" I murmur, afraid I'll bring Stavros charging out of his bedroom. "You're still there?"

Where would I go? Believe me, there are no other heads around here I'd like to hop into.

A lump clogs my throat. Sudden tears burn behind my eyes, but I don't know what they're for. "I just... When I first got back to the room after the daimon wrecked the ball, you didn't answer me."

Oh. Is that what happened? Julita's voice turns abashed. *I don't know exactly what I did. The chandeliers were breaking, and we saw that woman*

dead, and I... I couldn't stop thinking about the knife in my neck. The way the blood filled my throat and I couldn't breathe...

I feel her shudder before she goes on. I suppose I was afraid I'd feel something like that all over again through you. And somehow I pulled in deeper where I couldn't feel anything at all. It was all simply dark, and I didn't know what you were doing or what was going on out there. Almost... peaceful.

My gut knots at the thought of the horrible memories the daimon's assault stirred up for her. "I can understand why you'd have panicked."

It was ridiculous, though. I've already been through it once. I've had extra time. And I didn't like not knowing what'd happened to you. I had to come back to make sure you were all right.

"I'm glad you're all right too," I say, and discover that I mean it.

And the men? Did they all make it through unscathed?

Julita tries to make the question casual, but a quiver of worry creeps in all the same. My jaw tightens.

She does care about them, no matter what went into her decision to rope them into her cause.

I incline my head. "I've seen Stavros, and he said the others are fine too."

Thank the gods for that. She pauses. It's the middle of the night now from the looks of things. Where were you going?

I stare down at the hand I set on the door handle, her question ringing through my skull. Her return has shaken my resolve. "I don't know."

Am I really going to turn tail and run out of sheer fear? I don't have any more reason to assume that I've harmed Julita's investigation than that I've helped it. Stavros even said...

I close my eyes against the wrench of uncomfortable emotion. That's what I'm really scared of, isn't it?

What I want. What I can't have.

I tip forward to rest my forehead against the cool wood. My pulse hammers on. But I can't quite make myself reach the handle again.

Coming to the college was never about me, not really. I don't know if I believe there's even the slightest chance that the gods would grant me absolution no matter how this turns out.

But there are far more lives on the line beyond just my own. Beyond the few that were lost tonight.

I wasn't prepared for this task. I don't know how to be the woman Julita

was—and her men wouldn't want me even if I could fake it.

I do know how to take a stand.

Julita came back. Julita could have floated off into the peaceful darkness she deserves, but she came back to keep fighting.

And to make sure I was okay.

She's already given her life once to protect the kingdom from the consequences the scourge sorcerers could rain down on us. How can I flee when I barely have a life to give up in the first place?

Maybe I can't rewrite my story into a hero's, but I'll be damned if I let it be a coward's tale.

With a few slow breaths, I trudge back toward the sofa. I grab the folded blanket off the shelf where it was tucked away and curl up on the cushions.

I committed myself to this course. I'm going to see it through.

Even if that choice is the end of me.

TWENTY-TWO



T *here he is*, Julita crows as I step into the warm morning air of the outer courtyard. *You just need to sneak close enough to overhear what he says.*

It doesn't look as if Wendos is going to be saying much of anything right now. He's hunkered down on the grass off by the southeast corner of the yard where Julita said he often takes in some sun, currently alone.

As far as I can tell, he's totally immersed in the book he's propped open on his knee. At least that'll make it easier for me to "sneak close."

I wet my lips and meander along the side of the Quadring beneath the first-floor classroom windows. Sticking to the shadows, I shouldn't be noticeable from any direction, but if someone happens to look my way, I could be simply taking a casual stroll.

Near the corners of the building, the stone walls jut out with a cluster of statues. The one at the southeast shows a figure meant to be King Melchior, the ruler of nearly a century past who shattered the tyranny of the Darium empire in Silana not long after Signy did in Velduny. He stands with bearded chin raised high and a majestic stone cloak draped over his broad shoulders, looming over several hunched figures gazing up at him in chiseled awe.

After a swift glance around to make sure no one's looking my way, I hop into the midst of the fawning subjects. Tucked between two of the stone figures, no one should be able to see me at all unless they walk right up to the statue.

I pull out one of the books I borrowed from the archives for further plausible deniability. I suspect whatever the peasant girls and wandering

spirits get up to in the Woudish folktales will be more interesting than listening to Wendos read anyway.

Julita doesn't share my sentiments. *Don't get too distracted. If he's going to talk to any of his co-conspirators, it'll be quick.*

I nod in acknowledgment, gritting my teeth against an argument. As soon as I woke up this morning, she started badgering me about what Wendos had gotten up to after the daimon assault at the ball, even more after I told her he'd seemed to think Romild had done something wrong.

So I'll humor her for an hour or two before our next meeting. Maybe if nothing happens, she'll finally reconsider the idea that her childhood tormenter is some kind of evil mastermind as well.

The vibe around the campus is noticeably uneasy after last night's bloodshed. The students passing me walk briskly rather than ambling, sticking close to their friends. There's still chatter, but I hear a lot more nervous giggles than I'm used to.

Our target doesn't remain totally isolated. A couple of women pause to chat with him briefly about his reading material. Not long after they've headed off, a male classmate he seems mildly annoyed with descends on him with a series of questions about a recent lecture on "resource" accumulation or something like that.

Each time, I peek around King Melchior's whirling stone cloak to watch for any unspoken signals passing between them. Nothing about the conversations looks remotely extraordinary.

"Do you know how long he and your brother kept up their experiments after they stopped hurting you?"

No, Julita admits. As soon as Borys realized I wasn't going to let him bully me anymore, he got much more secretive. Anything else they did, it was well away from me.

My ass is starting to ache from being squashed against the hard stone, but then a fourth schoolmate ambles up to Wendos. He casts a furtive glance around that sets my senses on the alert.

This guy looks like he might be up to something.

Unfortunately, he's cautious with his voice as well as his surroundings. I can't make out the words he murmurs to Wendos.

Julita's former tormenter shakes his head, his voice also lowered, but more as if he's appeasing his companion than like he really thinks he needs to hide it. I still catch his response.

“Believe me, I tried my best.”

The nervous guy rubs his mouth and mutters something else I can't hear.

Wendos sighs. “It's like with rootbeetles—you can point them in the right direction, but you can't ensure they'll act exactly the way you'd want. I conveyed the information as clearly as I could.”

He gives a rueful smile. “Speaking of rootbeetles, have you seen that specimen Rolf brought back to the club room? I've never come across one quite that color before.”

As they exchange a few more comments about various creepy-crawlies, Julita gives a little shudder. *Ugh. Bug club. It figures he'd be interested in creatures that scuttle in the dirt.*

I'm turning his early remarks over in my head. “Do you think he was talking about bugs the whole time?” I murmur. “What he said about conveying information—maybe he tried to tell the college staff or even the palace about whatever he thought Romild was up to. And they wouldn't take action.”

My ghostly passenger snorts. *I can hardly imagine that. He probably enjoyed the violence.*

He hadn't looked as if he was enjoying it when I saw him, but I'm not sure how to convince Julita of that when she wasn't aware enough to see for herself.

“I could try talking to him myself,” I venture. “Feel him out, see what he might—”

No, Julita cuts in. I don't want him paying any attention to you at all.

I grimace, holding back further argument. She *does* know the man better than I do, even if her knowledge is colored by long-held resentment.

It's resentment that he totally earned, whether he's realized that and is trying to make amends or not.

When I glance over again, Wendos is getting up from the grass with a stretch of his arms. He tucks his book against his side and strides off toward the Quadring's main entrance.

I watch him go and then wriggle out of my hiding spot.

We've still got nearly an hour before we're due for the meeting, but Alek will probably be in the archives already. I could always mention to him what I've overheard from Wendos and see what he makes of it.

As I pass through the inner courtyard, a chipper voice rings out. “Ivy! Where are you off to?”

Esmae trots over to join me, her expression so eager that guilt jabs through my gut. I made a point of finding her in the dining hall this morning to confirm that she made it through the ball unscathed, but she was just hustling off to a class, so we barely had time to talk.

Now I'm the one hustling... and I can't even give her a real excuse.

"Good to see you again," I say with a hasty smile, scrambling for a suitable pretext. "Ster. Stavros wanted me to attend a meeting with him, some important staff thing, and I'm nearly late."

Esmae's face falls a little, but she catches it with a renewed smile of her own. "Oh, well, you wouldn't want to upset *him*. I'm sure our paths will cross later."

"I'll look for you at dinner."

I hurry on as if I really am risking Stavros's wrath. Just inside the Domi's door, I pass a soldier from the Crown's Watch, whose gaze slides over me without remark.

The hairs on the back of my neck stand on end as I veer down the hallway toward the library. Stavros did say that the palace was going to send extra guards to keep an eye on the college.

Which means they're keeping an eye on me too.

I'll just have to keep looking like a totally normal professor's assistant. This is what I committed to last night when I decided to stay.

A couple of younger students are drifting down the hall hung with tapestries, commenting on the artwork. I make as if I'm simply appreciating the woven illustrations too until they walk around the corner and I can open up the secret passage.

In the room below, Alek is leaning over the desk as usual. His head lifts when I emerge from the wall, but without the same jerk of surprise as the first time.

A brief smile crosses his face before it falls into his usual stern expression. "You couldn't wait to get to work?"

"After that catastrophe of a ball, it seems slightly more urgent than before."

I step closer, peering at what I can see of his skin around his mask. "Did you make it through completely unscathed?"

He lets out a rough laugh. "There are a few benefits to sticking mostly to the walls. I was on the outskirts from the start."

The question of why he feels the need to hang back itches at me.

Does he think whatever he's hiding behind his mask is really so off-putting? Every bit of him that I *can* see is perfectly appealing.

I yank my thoughts back before I spend more than an instant admiring the curve of his full lips. I've already been imagining kissing enough of these out-of-reach men without adding another to the heap.

My gaze drops to the scroll Alek has spread open on the desk, and it proves an excellent distraction. There's a large T at the top of the paper, with lines branching off in various directions leading to scrawled notations.

I motion to them. "What's all this?"

Alek's stance straightens at the change in topic. He taps the scroll. "I've been charting out all of Ster. Torstem's associations. Family members, friends, close colleagues, favorite students, clubs he runs or has been involved with, classes he teaches..."

He's made a map of the man's life. I study the flow of the lines. "Most of them don't appear to connect to each other, only to him."

Alek nods with a twist of his mouth. "Yes. I haven't found any cluster that would suggest an unexpectedly large collaboration or an unusual combination of personal and professional life. If he's involved in a college-wide conspiracy, he hasn't shown any outward signs of it in his affiliations."

"I suppose that would be a little much to ask for anyway," I mutter, resting my fingers at the top of the page. "Is there any sign of where he might have brought kids from?"

"Not so far. I had a chance to exchange a quick word with Benedikt at the start of the ball—he said he's gotten confirmation that it wasn't the first time Torstem has brought a kid around to see the college. Apparently it's a fairly common habit of his. But the people he talked to were under the impression they were relatives from his own family or those of associates."

I've spotted the family tree part of the chart. "He doesn't have much in the way of his own relatives, it looks like."

"He doesn't," Alek agrees. "One grown daughter who's taken a wife and adopted a toddler. One sister and a couple of cousins, only a few children between them, either years past dedication age or many years off. No one who'd match the boy you described."

"And no one in his family would have acted like an outer-warder anyway." I frown.

Alek glances toward the door to the larger archives. "I wanted to get access to his financial records. Those could tell quite a story. The college has

its own banking system for staff, and all money goes in and out through the accounting office. But the accountants keep the ledgers in a secure room off the library. It's not the sort of thing they'd hand over or I can simply walk in and take."

My spirits lift with a flash of renewed confidence. Now this sounds like exactly the kind of job I'm meant to do.

"Show me where the room is, and we'll figure something out."

Alek shoots me a skeptical look. "They're not going to let you just walk in either."

"I wasn't planning on asking." I waggle my fingers. "Thief, remember?"

He pauses, a whole debate going on in the shadow that passes over his eyes.

Julita lets out a bright chuckle. *Oh, this is going to be fun.*

"Julita approves of the plan," I add, because I can.

Alek's gaze jerks to mine again. His lips purse.

Then his flicker of a smile comes back. "Fine. Let's see what you can make of it, at least."

He leads me through the larger archive room and then two more basement areas that are stuffed full of all the documents and books the archivists don't think anyone really needs but can't bear to get rid of anyway. We slip up a winding staircase and into the library proper.

I've never actually been in this vast room before. The smell of aged leather and paper comes with less dust than the lower archives, and the endless rows of bookcases are spaced farther apart for ease of access, with narrow rugs stretching in between. Every shelf is packed with worn leather covers.

I drink in the scent and suppress the longing to wander from row to row, scanning every title. We're on a mission here.

Alek leads me on a roundabout route, avoiding the clusters of chairs around small tables where students are murmuring to each other over open texts. In a far corner of the room, he nods toward a door with a glass pane etched with Estera's sigil and a bronze plaque proclaiming it the *Accounting Archive*.

"Who can open that door?" I ask him quietly.

"Only a couple of the librarians are on the accounting staff and have access. Usually, one works in the morning and the other in the afternoon." He cranes his neck to peek through the window from afar. "Stera. Elzbita is in

there right now.”

“And they just sit around all day waiting for someone to need to make a transaction?”

Alek shakes his head. “They’re still librarians and archivists too. They come out and advise the students when they aren’t otherwise occupied.”

I take in the shelves around us, the small table off to the side that no one has ventured far enough to sit at, the hardwood floor partly covered by more rugs. A plan takes shape in my head.

“If you can come up with an excuse to request her help, something you’d specifically need her for over the other librarians, I can get that ledger. You’ll just need to keep her busy for long enough for me to find the right one.”

Alek inhales a little shakily, but when I look at him, a spark has come into his bright brown eyes. He rocks on his feet as if gathering momentum. “I can do that. Yes.”

He aims a quick smile at me, brighter than the one before. Great God help me if my heart doesn’t flip right over at the conspiratorial gleam in the flash of his teeth. Then he strides forward without waiting for further instructions.

I dash to the table, nudge one of the chairs aside, and duck down where I’ll be out of sight. I’ve got a clear view to the accounting office, about ten paces away.

As Alek knocks on the door, I slide a knife out of its sheath on my leg. My fingers curl around it, the muscles in my arm already flexing as I judge the distance.

The librarian opens the door, and Alek gives her a spiel I can’t totally follow about source documents and financial interconnections.

Whatever he’s getting at, Stera. Elzbita appears to catch on. She nods a few times and then, huzzah, pushes the door wide to step past it and usher him to a set of shelves elsewhere in the library.

I watch the swing of the door back toward its frame and listen to the padding of their footsteps retreating. At the last possible second, I flick my hand forward.

The knife flies through the air and hits the space between the door and the frame just before the door thuds into place. The two slabs of wood pin the blade between them, leaving the door just a smidge ajar.

Julita lets out a whoop of approval in my head.

I allow myself a victory grin and glance around this corner of the library again. Alek and Stera. Elzbita have disappeared from view; no one else is

around.

I stay low anyway, darting across the short span of floor and reclaiming my knife as I scoot through the doorway. I close the door behind me in case anyone passes by who'd be concerned.

The accounting room smells like tallow, though I can't see any candles currently in use. A modest glow streams from a thin window over the built-in bookcases.

I scuttle past the desk, keeping my head below the level of the window on the door, and paw through the rows of leatherbound ledgers on the shelves. Irritatingly, they have only numbers that are meaningless to me printed on their spines, with no apparent order.

After peeking inside a few, I realize the pattern at the same time Julita apparently does. *They're alphabetical by name. Ster. Torstem's should be toward the end, then.*

It only takes a few more tries to land on the one with his name on the first page. I don't bother flipping through the pages with their cramped notations yet, just hug the ledger close to my chest and slink back over to the door.

It should be simple enough to slip back out and—

Voices filter through from outside. I freeze with a lurch of panic at the thought that the librarian might have returned already.

But it's two male voices, joking about how far up their professor's ass they'd like to stick the scroll they were just poring over.

I hold still and silent, willing them to move on. For some reason, they've decided to hang around right by the accounting office.

Obnoxious asses, Julita mutters. Why don't they get moving?

My mouth starts to go dry. Just how long can Alek keep Stera. Elzbita occupied with his made-up question?

As if on cue, my magic twitches in my chest. Jumping to remind me that *it* could move these obstacles ever so easily if I'd just let it.

I inhale slowly and will it to calm down. Will myself to believe I have everything under control and there's no reason my power should be upset at me for not giving in.

My riven soul isn't totally convinced. A needle-sharp prickling resonates through my ribs. I brace my hand against the doorframe.

It should be a relief when the two blathermouths outside finally budge. Their voices slowly but surely fade away as they amble off.

Now I just have to pull off a stealthy maneuver while my insides are

gnawing on themselves. Lucky me.

With my jaw clenched, I ease up to peek through the window. The moment the two men have veered around the nearest bookcase, I gird myself and run for it.

With a quick push to ensure the door closes behind me, I sprint across the rug. A deeper jolt of pain puts a hitch in my stride, but I let myself drop with it so I can skid beneath the table.

As my shoulder bumps one of the wooden legs, Alek's voice reaches my ears, raised a little louder than I'd typically expect. To make sure I hear them coming?

"Thank you so much for your help, Stera. Elzbita. I'm sure I'm on the right path now."

While I watch from my hiding spot, the librarian pats him on the arm and heads back into her office. I stay braced for a few seconds in case she's going to burst back out announcing the theft, the pain dwindling with each moment she doesn't.

Alek ambles away with an uncertain expression. When I'm sure there'll be no immediate retaliation, I duck out and follow him.

Through unspoken agreement, I hang back several paces behind him all the way to the stairs to the archives room. I hit the bottom of the staircase and find Alek waiting there, his eyes gleaming even brighter than before.

His gaze drops to the book clutched in my arms. "You got it?"

I grin at him. "This is the one."

When I hold it out to him, he takes it and examines the first few pages. A smile stretches across his lips. "You really pulled it off. I don't know how you did it."

I shrug. "We all have our own talents. I couldn't have talked the librarian into walking away with me."

He swings the ledger under his arm and meets my gaze to encompass me in his delight. "Not bad for our first real mission together, huh?"

I can't help smiling back. Who'd have thought it'd be Alek out of all of the guys who'd help me pull off a crime—and revel in the thrill of it?

As we head back to the meeting room, he walks with an extra spring in his step. "Is that the sort of thing you needed to do a lot of, surviving on the streets? Sneaking into places, making quick escapes?"

I think of my "home" in the cloth factory. "Yeah, that was a pretty big part of it. Especially as I got older. When you're a kid, you can get away with

a little more.” Sleeping on a doorstep. Plucking a few spare pieces of fruit off someone’s tree. “Thankfully, the older I got, the more practice I had at staying unnoticed.”

Alek halts, his gaze gone serious again. “When you’re a kid—how old were you when you left home?”

My stomach knots. I probably should have omitted that bit.

“Twelve,” I say quickly. “Not *that* young.”

But young enough for Alek’s eyes to widen. “And your parents just let you—I mean, I know they were harsh with you, but—”

“They didn’t *let* me. I went, and there wasn’t much they could do about it.”

My tone is probably too sharp. It isn’t him I’m upset with—and he isn’t even wrong.

I doubt they ever looked for me. I doubt they felt anything but relief that I was no longer their problem.

Alek doesn’t appear to take any offense to my retort. He hesitates and then offers me another smile, smaller but somehow more giddy than the excited one before. “I suppose it worked out for the best in the end. If it wasn’t for that, you wouldn’t be here with us.”

He doesn’t really mean me. He means the woman I’m carrying with me. I *know* that.

But my hand still reaches for his of its own accord, as if some part of me needs the physical contact to confirm our solidarity. Or maybe I’m trying to make it totally clear to him how much I am in this crazy situation with him.

Foolish of me. I’ve barely brushed his fingers before Alek is yanking them away.

The connection I thought I felt snaps.

The scholar opens his mouth, closes it again, and then tips his head toward the room where we usually meet. “We’d better look through this quickly. We don’t want it missing for too long before we return it.”

“Of course not,” I say, pretending his rebuff never happened, and shove my jumbled feelings down.

I need to keep those ridiculous impulses reined in. We’re working together only for now, and soon enough we won’t be.

And I’ll go back to doing everything on my own.

No one else to worry about. No one else calling the shots.

The thought shouldn’t create a hollow sensation in the pit of my stomach.

We tramp back to the small, dusty room, and Alek tosses himself into the chair behind the desk. I perch on the desk's edge while he pages through the ledger, starting at the most recent entries and skimming back through the pages with impressive speed.

"There are regular expenses marked as donations, the same amount once a month, going back years," he reports after a moment. "To 'RI' it says, and nothing else."

"Someone's initials?" I suggest.

"Perhaps. I'll see if a full name comes up."

He's got less than ten pages left when he pauses. "Now that's quite the sum. A large endowment to some place called the Riverside Institute for Children's Wellness, fifteen years ago."

RI, Julita murmurs at the same time as my heart leaps.

"Children," I repeat.

"I've never heard of that organization before." Alek peers at the page and then flips back through a few more. "But it looks like the monthly donations started right after that initial endowment."

He glances up at me, a glimmer of his earlier exhilaration coming back into his eyes. "I think we've got it."

Before I can respond, the far wall wavers, and Benedikt steps out of the hidden passage.

He raises his eyebrows at the two of us. "Hard at work already? The others should be along in a moment. What are you two looking so smug about?"

I hop off the desk, my good mood returning. "We're uncovering all of Ster. Torstem's secrets. Now we've just got to check out this place and find out what he's really up to."

TWENTY-THREE



Right after I've stepped into the stable, I stop for a moment and simply breathe in the sweet and musky scents. A faint aura of comfort settles over me.

Not entirely purposefully, I find myself wandering over to the corner that holds Toast's stall. The dark bay stallion lets out a huff at the sight of me and paws one hoof against the ground.

I reach out my hand and hold it steady a few inches from his face until he concedes to bowing his head so I can give his jaw a gentle scratch. Then he shakes his mane as if to make the statement that he doesn't like the attention *that* much, so I shouldn't get any ideas.

I click my tongue at him. "I wouldn't take you out today anyway. We're supposed to be making a good impression."

Personally, I hope you never sit yourself on that beast again, Julita pipes up.

"Oh, he's not as bad as he wants people to think. Are you, Toast?" I extend my hand upward, and he allows me to scratch beneath his forelock this time.

A soft chuckle rings out from down the aisle.

Casimir strolls over, his expression lit with amusement. "Making friends with all kinds of unlikely characters, I see. You got here early."

All at once, I feel awkward, although I had no expectations of keeping the stable to myself. If anyone was going to interrupt my peace, I'd rather it was Casimir than any of the other nobles.

I offer Toast one of the apples I liberated from the breakfast spread and

give Casimir a shrug. “I figured since I had to come out here anyway, I might as well make a visit of it. The horses are better company than a lot of the people back there.” I jab my thumb toward the college buildings.

Casimir’s chuckle expands into a full laugh. Something in his gaze feels more thoughtful than usual as he considers me. “I suppose I shouldn’t be surprised you’d feel that way. Have you gotten to spend much time around horses before?”

An honest answer tumbles out of me before I can think better of it. “My family had a mare. She was better company than my parents most of the time too.”

Casimir nods as if he can hear all the things I haven’t said. “I’m fond of them myself. They’re spirited but straightforward animals. So many different personalities within that. And they don’t ask for much. I’d spend more time out here if it wouldn’t leave all my clothes smelling like horse.”

The affection is obvious in his voice despite that last remark. He follows it up with a wink. “I don’t mind, but it doesn’t go over well with most patrons.”

A pang passes through my gut at the thought of the people who are already enjoying Casimir’s various talents, even though it’s not as if I had any plans to do so myself.

He’s never shown a sign that he’s anything other than pleased to make his living by pleasing others. Why should it bother me?

It’s a little thrilling to discover there’s at least one thing he cares about just for himself, though.

I shoot him a grin in return. “Those patrons don’t know what they’re missing.”

Then I glance at the stalls around me. “Since you’ve gotten to know all the different personalities, maybe you can help me pick out a good ride for a trip through the city. I’d rather not test my truce with Toast that far just yet.”

“Hmm. Well, you can’t have Pepper, because she’s my best pal.” He pauses to stroke the forehead of a dapple gray mare who’s poked her head from her stall with a whicker.

Casimir offers her a beaming smile and considers the rest of the row. “Scout is a steady one, very stalwart but still knows his own mind. I think he’d be a good fit for you.”

I follow his gesture to a sorrel gelding who peers at me with curious eyes.

“You want to get out there and stretch those legs?” I ask the horse, who

snorts eagerly.

I go to get a bridle and saddle. Toast makes a vague grumbling sound as I pass him by.

“Be nicer to me next ride, and I’ll pick you more often,” I call over to the stallion, and Casimir lets out another laugh.

Scout proves to be everything I could ask for in a steed, waiting for my commands and leaping to follow them without any dithering. I let Casimir leave a few minutes ahead of me to give the illusion that we’re on separate errands, but it’s only a matter of minutes before I’m trotting through the streets of the inner wards to our chosen meet-up spot by the old wall.

As I draw up beside the courtesan, we pass through the ruined gate and into the middle wards. Looking over at him, I can’t help noticing how relaxed he looks astride the mare.

Casimir rarely comes across as anything less than content, but there’s a sense of deeper serenity to his stance as he sways with the horse’s strides that I’m not sure I’ve ever seen before. It lights a happy glow in my chest that I can’t quite bear to squash.

They don’t ask for much, he said before about the horses. Maybe the demands of his work get to him more than he normally reveals.

“Is riding part of the companionship curriculum too?” I ask.

Casimir adjusts his grip on the reins. “A small part, and only for those who aren’t tied to a very specialized area of focus like bardery or painting. We’d need to be able to keep up if a patron is in the mood to go for a jaunt on horseback, of course.”

“So you only go out if someone you’re attending to wants to?”

He shoots me a wry smile. “That’s essentially the job description. I can’t say I wouldn’t mind taking a ride through the woods more often, but I have plenty of other activities to occupy myself with.”

I don’t hear any complaint in his tone, but my gut twists. “It seems to me that you should have some time in there to think about what *you* want, to make yourself happy, you know. Don’t you deserve it as much as anyone who’d come to you as a patron?”

Gods above, from everything I’ve seen of him, he deserves true contentment more than the rest of those elite pricks.

Casimir blinks at me as if I’ve said something absurd. “Knowing I’ve brought some kind of joy into another person’s life does make me happy. I wouldn’t have gone into the profession otherwise.”

“I know. I only meant...”

I shake my head, not sure how to put the ache inside me into words. It isn't really my place to meddle anyway. “Never mind. I obviously don't know the ins and outs of it.”

I shift my attention to the streets we're passing through. “You're sure the Riverside Institute of Child Wellness isn't *in* Riverside?” That ward lies not far beyond the old walls, in the middle-class zone where I'd imagine a man like Ster. Torstem would feel more comfortable than the fringes we're headed toward.

“It is on the side of the river,” Casimir says. “I'd imagine Ster. Torstem picked the name knowing people would assume it referred to the neighborhood, so they wouldn't realize and be surprised he'd invest in a facility in the outer wards. But I can't imagine there are two organizations with the same name, and Alek confirmed it's in Siltston.”

I hum to myself. I thought I'd be going on this venture alone—and not on horseback. But once we determined how official-sounding the possible source of Torstem's child visitors was, approaching the workers there as nobles seemed more likely to get us answers.

I'll still be using my street-rat wits to build a larger picture of the situation. And none of the other men argued about Casimir joining me.

He could cajole a mouse out of a starving cat's paws, Julita said approvingly when he volunteered.

Let's hope the opposition we face isn't quite that desperate.

As we weave through the narrowing streets near the river, evidence appears of how Siltston got its name. A thin layer of dried mud and grit coats every low surface.

I learned early on to avoid the neighborhoods in this area right after a rain. The banks of the Starsil River drop lower in the fringes, and it splits off into several nearby culverts that all flood together when there's a big enough storm.

Julita's presence squirms at the back of my skull. *Ugh. I can't see why anyone would want to live here.*

Does she think they have a real choice?

My silk dress feels uncomfortably light compared to the tunic I'd usually wear when moving through these streets—with pockets full of silver to leave on the windowsills of the needy. How many con artists have screwed over these citizens in the days since I last dealt out my version of justice?

I inhale deeply to settle my nerves.

I'll be back. We have a far bigger heap of injustice to tackle right now.

Casimir leads the way through the last few turns, which end at a building slightly less ramshackle than its neighbors. The broad, three-story structure boasts a mix of stone, wood, and a few thin trees sprouting through the walls for reinforced stability.

It's nearly ten times bigger than most of the shacks that serve as individual homes on the fringes, with a yard of scruffy grass and wan vegetables all around its gray walls. Painted sigils for Inganne, Prospira, and Elox decorate the door, calling for childish delight, familial comforts, and good health.

I frown as I stare up at the place. "I've been past here before. I never knew what its official name was."

Casimir lifts an eyebrow. "I see Ster. Torstem didn't bother to have a sign erected announcing the institute's formal title or his ties to it."

"How very surprising," I say wryly.

As we dismount and tie the horses near the gate, a babble of childish voices reaches our ears. A gaggle of kids who look to be around six or seven dash by through the garden.

A girl a few years older shouts at the wild ones from an open window. I spot a couple of others flitting by in another room.

They're all dressed in plain cotton and wool, darned and patched to extend its use—no noble clothing here. The grubby faces and tangled hair tell a familiar story that Ster. Torstem's fancy name for the place can't paint over.

This isn't any kind of "institute." It's an orphanage, plain and simple. A handful of adults trying to care for more children than anyone really should, because it's either that or leave them with no one at all.

Why did Torstem care enough to invest in this place, however much he does?

I hate to think how much worse the kids might look without his contributions. They do at least appear to be decently fed and sheltered.

Our arrival—or rather, the horses' arrival—provokes a whole lot of squealing excitement from one contingent of children. Before we've even breached the gate, a slim middle-aged woman with a worn face and a simple but clean linen dress appears in the doorway, presumably drawn by the clamor. "Can I help you?"

She doesn't sound exactly surprised that two people in noble clothes have

shown up at her doorstep.

Casimir takes the lead with the whole talking thing. He strides up to the woman and offers a respectful dip of his head. “Our apologies for the intrusion. One of your benefactors asked us to take a look around and see if there’s anything additional you might need.”

I can’t imagine the orphanage has more than one noble investing in it. The woman’s brow knits a little, but she nods in acceptance. “I mean, we could always use more help. More hands to keep the kids in order, more variety of food, better clothing. But he’s been plenty generous. We do all right.”

“Could we come inside?” Casimir asks, spreading his hand in appeal. “I promise we have no intention of judging what you’ve accomplished. I simply want to make sure we can give him a thorough account of where additional contributions would be most appreciated.”

At his soft smile, the orphanage manager can’t seem to help smiling back. “I don’t see why not. And if either of you have an interest in taking one of these sprites off our hands, they are capable of behaving themselves if given enough incentive.”

The interior of the building has a similar atmosphere to the exterior—untidy and chaotic but homey. The smell of fresh-baked bread mingles with the tang of sweat and chamber pot spills.

Through the doorway to what serves as a living room, I see an older woman sitting in a ratty armchair, tilted toward the cluster of small children gathered on the floor around her.

“That’s how they tell it,” she’s saying. “The All-Giver is all things and made all things, but the One God got tired of handling it all alone. So One lay with the sea and the sky and the earth to birth the nine godlen, three for each, so that they could help oversee the realms.”

“The All-Giver is a lady, then, if she had babies,” one of the kids pipes up.

The elderly woman chuckles and moves her hand down her front in the three-fingered tap. “The Great God is both man and woman and neither all at the same time. It’s the grandness of divinity.”

The little ones look as if they’re as unsatisfied with that answer as I’d have been at that age, but there’s no denying the fondness in the woman’s expression or the eager curiosity in theirs. They are cared for here.

More than I was, after everything went wrong.

I swallow down the ache of that thought and yank my attention back to our host.

The woman leads us through a few of the rooms on the lower floor and up the stairs to the second, which holds mostly bedrooms it appears four or five children share each. As far as I can tell, there are fifty or so orphans in residence at the moment, ranging from a babe one of the other staff is feeding from a leather bottle to gawky preteens who can't be more than a few months shy of their dedication ceremonies.

But that's the oldest I see. As we circle back to the staircase, I venture a question. "Where do they go after their dedications?"

The manager runs her hand back through her rumpled curls. "Oh, the ones who don't end up adopted—which is most of 'em—go off to the temples in service of their chosen godlen. It's not a bad life. They're usually happy to get away from the bedlam here."

"Do they get to see much of the city beyond the institute before then?" Casimir asks. "I can tell you don't have enough assistance to easily keep track of all of them if you make an excursion."

"That's true. It's simpler keeping an eye on them here. We've got the garden and the river there for them to splash around in. But of course our benefactor arranges occasional visits to the royal college for the ones he feels have the most interest in seeing what the gods can provide."

I stifle a frown. Is that really all there is to Torstem's tours? He's showing off the glory of the ruling powers?

I can't see anything especially ominous about the arrangements here, though.

Casimir snaps his fingers. "That reminds me. I assume you keep records of which of your charges made those visits, and where each of them were placed after their dedications?"

The woman hesitates. "Well, yes, of course."

"It would be ever so helpful if we could look those over while we're here. There are a couple of past visitors who made an impression on people they met at the college, who'd like the chance to support their continued spiritual growth."

It's a deft enough excuse that I mentally applaud Casimir's cleverness. We need to find out what's really happened to the kids Ster. Torstem brought around.

But the woman twists her hands in front of her, maybe realizing that she

doesn't have definite proof that we're associated with her benefactor at all.

Casimir beams at her as if he hasn't noticed her reluctance. A whiff of magic tingles over my skin before he speaks again. "You really have done a fantastic job for them here with the resources you have. I must commend you for that."

The orphanage manager's smile comes back. "Well, thank you. I—here, let me get our record books. They aren't the tidiest ever, but you should be able to find what you need."

He does have a way about him, doesn't he? Julita says with a tinge of her own admiration.

He does. It's almost trickery, how he persuades people, but he's so gentle about it you can tell there's no malice in it.

I've never known anyone quite like him. It's hard not to think the world would be a better place with more.

As the manager sets a few stained canvas-bound books on a rickety table, a wail bursts out from downstairs. She lets out an exasperated sigh. "I'd better handle that. I'll be back in a moment."

Casimir flips open the first book. He pulls out a paper and writing supplies as he peruses the pages.

My gaze veers to the staircase. I lower my voice. "I'm going to take a quick look at the third floor."

"Excellent idea."

I check to make sure no staff are in view of the staircase and then slip up the steps, wincing inwardly at every creak. All of the rooms I peek into are more bedrooms, but at the third doorway, I pause.

The nervous boy I saw with Ster. Torstem a few days ago stands near the window. I recognize his wideset eyes and pinched chin in an instant, even though he's dressed in a shabby tunic and trousers now.

I ease into the room. "Hello," I say, doing my best to channel Casimir's warmth. "You came by the college the other day, didn't you? Did you enjoy your visit?"

The boy bites his lip as he considers me. Then he gives a tentative nod. "There's so much that gets done there. It was very impressive."

Something about his answer sounds rehearsed, but then, I wouldn't put it past Ster. Torstem to insist on a certain way of talking about the college regardless of his reasons for taking the kids there.

"I suppose you'll be having your dedication ceremony soon," I say.

The boy brightens up immediately, so much that I can't doubt his enthusiasm now. "Oh, yes. I hope that Sabrelle will welcome my sacrifice with a great gift in return."

Well, I can't call him unambitious. He doesn't appear to be traumatized or unhinged. Just... quiet, which is far from a crime.

I try another angle. "What did you think of Ster. Torstem?"

"He's very generous. It was good to see... good to see where he comes from."

The boy gets a bit of an odd look, as if he's worried he's offended me. I scramble for another question. "I trust there wasn't anything frightening that happened during your visit?"

And gods above, let him tell me if there was.

The boy twists his hands in front of him. His next words come out a little too fast. "Oh, there's nothing to be scared of. It's people like Torstem who are making sure everything will be all right."

His face pales a little more, and he makes that hasty protective gesture over his chest like I saw on the campus. "I should help in the kitchen," he announces before I can say anything else, and darts past me out the door.

The whole conversation leaves me uneasy, but in such a vague way I can't say anything was actually wrong. It's odd that the boy referred to Torstem informally—but outer-ward kids aren't used to professional honorifics.

What did he mean about making sure things would be all right, though? That sounded strangely ominous even though it was phrased to be reassuring.

My nerves itch all the way back to Casimir, who's just closing the last of the records books. At the sound of the manager's voice traveling up the stairs, I duck inside and lean against the wall as if I never left.

When he hands the books back to the woman, Casimir gives her an emphatic thank you before we head outside. He tucks the paper he wrote his notes on into his breast pocket.

I have to wait until we're back on our horses and a few streets away from the orphanage before he tells me anything he learned. "If the records are correct, then all the children Ster. Torstem has tapped for college visits are serving at temples as she said."

"We'll just have to look them up at those temples and see if there's anything odd about their situation now. I spoke with the boy I saw earlier this week... He couldn't tell me much, but I got the sense he was still nervous

about the situation.”

Casimir rubs his chin. “I suppose it’s difficult to judge based on that. I’d imagine a visit to the college would be intimidating to any child not raised near it.”

The comment sets off a niggling of curiosity I decide to give in to. “Do—do you have any children? I mean…”

I flush. It’s got to be obvious what I mean without my spelling it out.

“Not as yet,” Casimir says in his usual easy tone. “Those of us in my trade who are trained at the college are supplied with mirewort. You’ve heard of it?”

I’ve taken it. “It prevents pregnancy. But it isn’t infallible.”

I’ve overheard more than one story of girls ushered into motherhood faster than they’d have preferred despite the herb.

“No, but it nearly is when you can get it pure. It’s difficult to grow and harvest, so supply is limited, and most purveyors mix it with various other herbs so it’ll go farther.” The courtesan’s mouth slants downward. “Few outside the inner wards have access to a fully effective option.”

My stomach sinks. And they wouldn’t be able to afford the pure stuff even if they had access.

I drag my attention away from that uncomfortable subject to the task we just completed. “Well, we now have a lot more information on Ster. Torstem’s activities than we did before. It was lucky you got your hands on those books.”

I glance sideways at him. “Or not about luck. Did you use your gift to convince her to let you at the books?”

I’ve never asked before what he traded his now-bejeweled teeth for.

The gleam in Casimir’s eyes confirms my suspicion. “It does come in handy for a variety of purposes.”

I hesitate and then push onward. “Am I allowed to ask what it *is*?”

“Ah.” Casimir looks a bit sheepish, but only in the most adorable way. “Ardone blessed me with the ability to determine what I could do that would make a person happiest at any given moment. The orphanage manager deeply wished to be reassured that she’s doing well by the children.”

My pulse stutters. Has he used that ability on me? “That sounds like quite a power.”

As if he’s guessed at my concern, his tone turns soothing. “I can’t do it often. Once or twice a day is my limit. And it’s rarely anything sizeable,

since it's limited by my immediate capabilities.”

He pauses. “When you first came to us, saying you were Julita’s friend, I could tell that you simply wanted us to hear you out. If you’d been looking to manipulate us, to get something more than our attention, I’d have picked up on it.”

Oh. I let out a rough laugh. “I guess I should be glad for your gift, then.”

His smile curves at the sly angle that might be my favorite. “I often am.”

The streets have become more crowded with midday bustle, especially as we leave the fringes behind. Casimir has to pull Pepper ahead of Scout, which makes talking difficult.

We don’t bother separating on our approach, since we can easily claim we happened to arrive back at the same time if anyone comments. After we’ve led our horses through the dance of the current password, I notice that Casimir chooses to remount rather than simply walk his mare to the stable on foot. I follow suit.

As the stable comes into view up ahead, I think the courtesan’s companionable glow dulls just slightly. Seeing it dims my own spirits.

No, I will not stand for that.

I nudge Scout forward to walk alongside the Casimir. “That trip didn’t take too long. You’ve got to have time for a quick canter through the woods.”

He pauses before answering. “I’m meant to be at etiquette class at the next bell.”

I snort. “The bell just rang a few minutes ago. You can fit it in. And charm them into forgiving you if you’re a bit late. Unless you’re just worried you and Pepper can’t keep up with me and Scout?”

The sly glint comes back into Casimir’s eyes, but he starts to shake his head. “As much as I appreciate the suggestion, Kindness—”

I don’t give him a chance to finish his refusal. I simply pluck the paper with his notes from his pocket and tap my heels against the gelding’s sides. “This is mine unless you can catch me!”

I press Scout to a canter, grinning at the sound of hoofbeats against the grass behind me and the laugh that spills from Casimir’s lips. We race to the edge of the woods where I joined in the mock hunt and down the broad, well-trampled main path.

Trees whip past us, leaves swaying overhead. Casimir is gaining on me, but I’m not ready for the reprieve from our duties to be over so quickly.

I tug Scout off to the side, into the brush. He has to slow to a walk, but so

does our pursuer.

“Ivy,” Casimir calls out mock-threateningly.

“You still haven’t caught me,” I retort over my shoulder.

Scout picks his way deftly between the shrubs and tree trunks, but Casimir hasn’t lost his cleverness. He directs Pepper over to the side and taps his heels the moment he sees a clear strip of land.

With a spring of her legs, she trots ahead of us. He wheels her around to block my path.

As I draw Scout to a halt, the exhilarated flush in Casimir’s cheeks and his matching grin relieve me of any guilt I might have felt over forcing the diversion.

I might not have the same gift he does, but I didn’t need it to know how to offer him a little happiness too.

The courtesan extends his hand, and I make a show of grudgingly handing over the paper. The brush of his fingertips against mine sends a jolt of warmth through me.

Casimir’s dark green gaze holds mine as he tucks it away again. “Thank you.”

My heart hitches with the giddiness I’m not supposed to feel. I force my tone to sound flippant. “You’re ever so welcome.”

The unbidden delight lingers as we let the horses amble back through the woods at a more leisurely pace.

This really is quite nice, Julita remarks. *I couldn’t see much appeal to riding for its own sake before. I wonder—*

My gaze catches on something through the trees. Julita goes quiet as I pull on the reins and squint through the shifting shadows.

“What’s the matter?” Casimir asks.

“The ground just looks... odd.”

I hop down from Scout and walk over on foot.

There’s a clearing so small you can barely call it that. I stop at the edge, staring at the ground.

The dirt is churned up in gouges and lumps. Fresh scratches scar a few of the surrounding tree trunks.

I bend closer to the jutting leaves of a weed. Dark red flecks show against the green.

My lungs constrict. “I think that’s blood.”

Casimir has followed me. He bends down to examine the plant, his

shoulder grazing mine with a warmth I welcome more than ever, and then catches my eyes with a nod.

Is the ground damp? Julita asks abruptly. *Check it.*

I reach forward to press my fingers to the churned earth. Moist bits stick to my skin.

Julita shudders. *It's not like that outside the clearing, is it.*

She doesn't say it like a question, but I scuttle backward to test the dirt there.

It hasn't rained in a few days. The soil there crumbles dryly at my touch.

"Did you notice something else?" Casimir asks.

"Julita did." I frown at the clearing. "The earth there is damp, but it shouldn't be."

Because they drenched it with water to wash away all the rest of the blood they must have spilled here, Julita says in a strained voice. *The wretched sorcerers carried out some ritual here earlier today.*

TWENTY-FOUR



I'm stretched out on the sofa, my sheet vanished but heat washing over my skin. Mainly because of the massive man bending over me.

"Ivy," Stavros murmurs in a liquid voice like nothing I've ever heard from him before. He's lost his shirt somewhere, but in my daze, I can't say I mind taking in the muscular expanse of his chest. "Gods, I can't stop thinking about you."

His fingers slide along my jaw, tilting my head up, and then he's captured my mouth.

Yes, this—this is what I've craved. The heat of him courses right through my body, sparking desire in every nerve.

I clasp the back of his neck and arch up to meet him. As my breasts graze his chest, an ache forms between my thighs.

His lips break from mine, and suddenly we're not alone. Alek kneels next to the sofa, his slim hand on my shoulder.

"You can't have her all to yourself," he says, as husky as Stavros. "It's my turn."

He leans in to claim a kiss of his own. My fingers trace the edge of his mask, and he kisses me harder. More lust spikes through my veins.

I have no idea what's going on here, but it feels too fucking good to ask questions.

There's a chuckle, and a well-built form nudges Alek aside. Benedikt clambers right onto the sofa to straddle me, his eyes gleaming with mischief. "Oh, I can top anything either of them could offer you."

Instead of pressing his mouth to mine, he brings his lips to the side of my

neck. As he nips the sensitive skin there, his palm swivels against my breast.

A whimper slips through my teeth.

“But none of them really know how to treat a lady.” Casimir sinks down next to me, heedless of Benedikt’s attentions, and glides a gentle thumb over my lips. All at once, they’re throbbing as if I’ve been starved for contact.

As Benedikt eases down my body, Casimir dips his head close and—

My pulse jolts at a sudden thump. My eyes pop open...

It’s just me. Me, with my skin flushed and a pang of need low in my belly, alone on the sofa where I’ve been sleeping.

Well, not quite alone. Daylight streams from the far window, glancing off Stavros’s ruddy hair as he bends to retrieve a box from the floor.

He catches me staring at him and offers a crooked grin. “I’d apologize for waking you up with my moment of clumsiness, but I’d rather say I was testing your reflexes. It’s about time you came out of dreamland anyway.”

Dreamland.

Right. Dreams.

Oh, gods, what a dream.

I must have stared at him a beat too long, remembering the all-too-vivid press of his bare chest against mine, because Stavros raises an eyebrow. I feel my cheeks flame scarlet.

“Good point,” I say, somewhat inanely, shoving off the sheet that is in fact still there. The former general has seen me in nothing but my underclothes before, yet somehow the nightgown that covers much more of me feels far too exposing. “I’ll get on with getting ready for the day. I’m sure we have much to do.”

Stavros’s eyebrow stays lifted as I grab the latest riding gown Casimir has sent along—to replace the one Anya splattered with her wine—and hustle over to the latrine. His drawl carries after me through the door. “Nice to see you so dedicated to your work, Thief.”

Yep, that’s all that’s going through my head. Total dedication to our cause. Also, my drawers are definitely not soaked between my thighs.

Gods smite me.

Julita must notice my discomfort, even if—thank all that’s divine—she isn’t privy to my imaginings. *Is something wrong? You seem a little agitated.*

I give her a subtle shake of my head in answer.

To my relief, the door thumps with Stavros’s departure before I’ve finished tying the laces on my dress. I splash a little water on my face, twist

my hair into the hasty arrangement I've gotten used to, and head down to the dining hall feeling almost normal.

As I slip into the vast room, I might get some inquisitive looks from the nobles at the nearest tables. At this point, who knows how far word has spread of my sudden apprenticeship under the much-lauded general and whatever other exploits people feel are gossip-worthy?

More ominous are the stern gazes of the two soldiers from the Crown's Watch standing guard near the doorway. Apprehension prickles down my back even though I know they're not here specifically for me.

A graceful wave of a hand gives me something else to focus on. Esmæ motions me over to the seat next to her.

I veer around to the counters to grab a plate of eggs and pastries before sinking down into the neighboring chair.

Unfortunately, the moment I sit down, I realize that I'm in the direct line of sight of Romild, two tables over. She catches me noticing her and narrows her eyes into a glower.

I drop my gaze to my plate as if it's the most fascinating arrangement of food I've ever seen and snatch up my fork. "I wonder if Romild is ever going to forgive me for that trick with the saddle."

Julita sniffs. *There's nothing to forgive you for. You were simply proving she can't hold a candle to your skills, after she so rudely questioned them.*

"Clearly she had a lot invested in vying for that position," Esmæ says in a more measured tone. "I can see how it'd have been... startling for her to find out it'd been taken without the typical procedure."

I grimace. "Don't people"—I cut myself off before I say *people around here*, as if I'm not a noble like them, and regather myself—"Don't all of us benefit from our connections sometimes? It isn't as if I arranged for my father to have known Ster. Stavros's before I was even born."

Esmæ bobs her head. "It's totally understandable that he'd have felt he could trust you—and from what I've heard, you've handled the job as well as anyone could ask. But when you really want something, I suppose it's hard not to feel some sting of unfairness."

The tightness of her voice prompts me to take a closer look at her. She doesn't sound as if she's simply speculating about a near-stranger.

Of course, she's been open with me about how desperately she wants to find a prestigious position of her own after she graduates. I guess it can't be too difficult for her to imagine being in a similar situation.

Esmæ aims a bright smile at me and motions to the pastries I chose at random. “I’m stealing that moon roll from you if you don’t eat it. The chefs outdid themselves with those.”

I crack a grin. “In that case, I’m eating it first. You’d better grab yourself another of your own.”

The crispy yet buttery shell and the creamy custard within really are something on the level of the gods. I’d be able to savor the delicacy more if Julita weren’t muttering in my head.

Jealousy isn’t Romild’s only problem if what you said is true. Now Wendos is harassing her? What’s he aiming for there? What are they all aiming for, sneaking around in the woods again?

The cream sours in my mouth. Casimir and I weren’t able to turn up any other clues about the scourge sorcerers’ apparent woodland ritual—not even enough to prove to anyone who didn’t already believe there’s a conspiracy that the damp earth has anything to do with illicit sorcery to begin with.

All Stavros could offer when I told him about it was a sardonic comment about needing to bring the king more than mud.

As I chew the last few morsels of the roll, my gaze darts across the room instinctively. It snags on Wendos’s dark shaggy hair, several tables off amid a few other students.

If he’s scheming anything right now, it’s how to inhale as much breakfast as possible. I’m still not sure he was exactly “harassing” Romild so much as expressing concern.

What did he notice about her that bothered him? What if it was *her* sneaking around in the woods with the other conspirators?

She did seem awfully comfortable in that setting during the hunt.

We’ve been focusing on Ster. Torstem, but no matter how involved he might be, it seems awfully unlikely that he’s offended the daimon so much all on his own. We’ve got to find his accomplices too.

“Is that a new dress?” Esmæ is asking. “It’s a good color on you.”

I glance down absently at the pale lilac silk. “Yes, you know, I needed another after the wine incident—I didn’t bring very much with me from home.”

Imagine if she saw what I usually wear.

“You’ll have to have your family send more.” Esmæ perks up. “I could practice my gift for you to get the message there quickly. Nikodi is farther away than I’ve tried, but it’d be good to stretch myself. I’d like to be crossing

country borders someday, and—”

As she’s talked, a slender man in the light blue linen tunic and trousers most of the non-teaching staff wear weaves through the tables to stop by Romild. He taps her shoulder and hands her a folded note.

She glances at its contents and frowns. Then she gets up out of her seat, leaving behind a plate she’s only half-cleared.

My pulse hiccups, and I miss whatever Esmae says next. Where’s my rival off to in such a hurry?

I think I’d better find out.

I scarf down one last mouthful of eggs and nudge back my seat as Romild approaches the door.

Esmae pauses, staring at me. “Are you going already?”

I snatch at the first excuse I can think of that would make sense to her. “I just saw someone who said he might have news soon about what’s happened to Julita. I’ve got to try to catch him before he heads to class—sorry, I didn’t notice him before.”

With feet practiced for speed and deft maneuvering, I make it to the hallway just as Romild reaches the corner to my left. As quietly as I can, I hurry after her.

She doesn’t glance backward, her steps brisk and her posture a bit stiff, as if she’s not happy about whatever the message said. The hall outside the dining area provides plenty of cover anyway with students coming and going.

As I turn the corner after her into the longer passageway leading past the main library doors, the traffic thins.

If she looks around, she won’t be able to help seeing me. And wondering why the hell I’m trailing at her heels.

I drift farther back, wishing the hall offered more in the way of columns or pedestals to duck behind, and a perfect solution presents itself in the form of Benedikt.

The bastard’s bastard strolls jauntily out of a nearby stairwell, looking as though he’s making for the dining hall. I dash over before he can get very far.

“Walk with me,” I say under my breath as I catch his elbow. “Pretend we’re having an absolutely fascinating discussion about some favor I’m asking you to do for my employer. And if Romild glances our way, block her view of me.”

Benedikt chuckles and swerves to join me, his gray eyes dancing with good humor. He pitches his voice similarly low. “I don’t know if I’d bother

to do any favors for Stavros, but I'll certainly lend you a hand. Or several, if I can collect them."

I manage not to roll my eyes at him. At least he's the most amenable of Julita's men to playing along.

It's hard not to appreciate his good humor. And to stop myself from flashing back to my dream when he—

I shove those memories away as well as I can, which is admittedly not very well. He's sauntering along next to me, his embroidered vest hanging loose over his dress shirt—which, in typical Benedikt style, he's left open halfway down his chest.

Maybe I've denied my bodily desires too much in the past couple of years. The glimpse I get of the muscular landscape beneath nearly sends my mind reeling right back to my overheated imaginings.

I jerk my gaze to Benedikt's face just as he leans his head conspiratorially close. "Why exactly are we following this fine lady? Out of curiosity."

"She might have had something to do with the daimon going wild at the ball," I say. "She also might have been the person who poisoned me the other evening."

"All right, those are two very good reasons for me to delay my breakfast. I'm honored that you called on me for assistance and will assume it had everything to do with my extreme prowess rather than because I happened to be the only person around."

I can't quite stifle a guffaw. Even though I'm only holding his arm to keep him within shielding distance, I give it a quick squeeze. "You're an excellent choice."

He taps one of his sacrificed earlobes. "My gift might come in handy, depending on exactly what you're planning. I have a knack for distracting people, just a little, when I want to get out of trouble."

My eyebrow leaps up. "And how often are you getting into trouble?"

He waggles his eyebrows right back. "I've got to keep a few secrets to maintain my intriguing aura of mystery."

I snort in amusement.

Honestly, it might be fun to have Benedikt along on one of my thieving exploits on the fringes. I can imagine him enjoying sticking it to a few con artists.

Picturing taking on the assholes in the outer wards with company warms me for a few seconds. Then I consider the stink and the dirt and everything

else about those streets any noble would turn up their nose at.

No, he'd never actually stoop that low even for a lark, would he?

I hate the way my heart sinks with that knowledge.

Benedikt cocks his head. "I wonder where exactly Miss Possible Poisoner is off to?"

Romild has strode straight past the library doors and picked up her pace even more as she approaches the next bend in the hall.

Julita hums. *It's just the recreational rooms over there—cards, billiards, darts, and the like. Although I suppose that isn't a horrible place to conduct a clandestine meeting without being too suspicious.*

I slow as we reach the corner and peek around it. Romild is bustling onward, so Benedikt and I continue after her.

"What are you studying here anyway?" I ask him, to keep up the appearance that we're having some important discussion. And because I'm interested, whether I should be or not.

Benedikt shrugs as if it doesn't matter all that much. "Oh, a little of this and a little of that. Technically I belong to the leadership division, not that I expect to lead much of anything. As I mentioned before, responsibility isn't really my forte. We royalty-adjacent types tend to get relegated into minor roles to keep us happy and *mostly* out of trouble."

"That does seem like it might be a difficult proposition for you."

"But I'm very rarely bored." Benedikt taps his chin. "I wonder what 'favors' I should ask Stavros to do for me in return? So many wonderful possibilities that would absolutely piss him off."

My lips twitch with a smirk at the thought—and at the same moment, Romild draws to a halt outside one of the rooms farther down the hall.

She peers inside and hesitates. Then she folds her arms over her chest and starts to pivot on her heel.

Shit, she's turning right back toward us.

I clutch Benedikt's arm in warning, but his gaze is already fixed on our target, noting her movements.

He swings toward me without missing a beat and flashes his roguish smile. "Don't stab me for this, Knives."

Before I can wonder what he's talking about, he nudges me up against the wall, leans his arm next to my head to hide my face, and plants his mouth on mine.

In the first instant, I think I must still be dreaming. But the heat of

Benedikt's very real kiss sparks a giddy thrill in me that's beyond anything my imagination conjured. My body tingles from head to toe as if I've been struck by a particularly delicious bolt of lightning.

It's far from my first kiss, but I can't say I've ever been kissed quite like this.

My breath hitches, Benedikt's tongue flicks skillfully over my bottom lip, and the part of my brain that actually wants me to survive the next week wakes up.

I'm not supposed to be kissing this man. I'm already in over my head enough.

I'd jerk away from him, but Benedikt eases back a few inches at the tensing of my body. He stays close enough to block any clear view of me from down the hall, his eyes still twinkling. "I think that did the trick."

I give him a pointed look, grasping hold of the remains of my self-restraint. "I'm pretty sure you could have accomplished the same result without going quite that far."

He offers me a smirk that's softer than usual. "This way was more fun. You'll have to forgive me for taking the opportunity that presented itself. I've been wanting to kiss you since you nearly unmanned Stavros."

His gaze flicks up to my forehead. "And if our ghostly friend enjoyed it too, all the better."

The reference to Julita—to the fact that he was thinking about her soul inside me when he kissed me—douses any lingering heat. I clench my jaw and draw myself up a little straighter against the wall.

A flick of my eyes tells me that Romild hasn't gone anywhere. She's standing with her back mostly to us again, staring at the note she was handed while she seems to wait for someone.

"Shall we—" Benedikt starts, and a different familiar voice reaches my ears from the opposite end of the hall.

"Make sure the carriage is ready. I'll be out in a few minutes after I take care of one more matter."

Ster. Torstem calls the words over his shoulder as he steps into the hall from one of the archways leading to the outer doors—speaking to a page or an assistant, I have to assume. He marches past our hallway in the direction of the library.

My heart skips a beat.

A carriage. He's going out somewhere in the city—to the orphanage? To

arrange some other plans we'd want to know about?

This is an opportunity I might not get again. There's only one possible course of action that fixes all of the problems I've just stumbled into.

I give Benedikt's arm a quick pat, willing the flush out of my cheeks. "Keep an eye on Romild until you've seen who she's meeting here. I'm going to find out what Torstem's up to."

TWENTY-FIVE



Benedikt's eyes widen, but I duck under his arm and dart off down the hall before he can protest.

The lilac silk I'm wrapped in glints in the light from the sconces. I wish I could dash to Stavros's quarters to grab my plain cloak, but I can't risk missing the carriage.

At least this color is significantly less eye-catching than the turquoise gown.

I slip through the doorway and cross the courtyards to the college's outermost gate. There is indeed a carriage waiting on the road just beyond the walls, modest by noble standards but still more finely carved than anything you'd usually see in the middle wards.

Outer-warders make do with carts and their feet.

Clouds clot the sky overhead, and the breeze feels damp against my cheeks. But the dimness makes it easier for me to avoid notice.

As I eye the vehicle from a shadowy alcove in the wall, it occurs to me that my dress is less than ideal for a variety of reasons. Noble gowns are a damn sight prettier than they are practical, especially for stealthy maneuvers.

Wetting my lips, I peer down at my skirt with its slits for riding. With a few hasty motions, I tie the loose bits tight around my thighs.

The young man Ster. Torstem sent ahead finishes conferring with the driver and heads back into the college. One of the guards on the top of the wall high overhead tosses a bored remark toward the other.

I ease along the wall until I'm out of view of the front of the carriage and then make a leap for it, bending low and sliding across the cobblestones.

With a soft whoosh of fabric, I'm hunched under the vehicle.

It isn't built so differently from the merchant's wagon I clung on to what feels like a century ago. To my immense gratitude, carriages tend to be set higher off the ground.

I hook my knees and elbows around the wooden reach bar that runs down the middle between the two sets of wheels. With another tug of the fabric gathered around my legs, I ensure it won't drag on the road.

Are you sure about this, Ivy? Julita asks. I can picture her frowning skeptically.

"Nothing I haven't done a dozen times before," I whisper, and tense at the thud of approaching boots.

Torstem doesn't notice anything out of the ordinary. He strides right up to the carriage. "Let's be off immediately."

Without another word, he heaves his stout body onto the seat above my hiding place.

The driver flicks the whip, and the gelding in the harness clops forward. The wheels rattle over the cobblestones on either side of me.

Julita speaks up again in a mildly droll tone. *So... you and Benedikt appear to be getting along well.*

I adjust my grip on the bar, swaying as the carriage veers around a bend in the road. "Is this really the best time to be talking about that?"

My lips purse of their own accord, bringing back the giddy sensation of his kiss. I shake my head against it as if answering my own question.

Julita clearly doesn't agree. *Why not? I'm the only one who can hear you with all the clatter out there. Have you got something better to do during the trip?*

"I guess not," I mutter.

There's nothing to be embarrassed about. He is appealing in his own way.

"Kissing him wasn't my idea in the first place."

You enjoyed it well enough.

My cheeks flare all over again. "You can't just assume—"

She lets out a tinkling laugh. *I might not be able to read your thoughts, but I experience everything your body does, Ivy. I know.*

"Well, it isn't going to happen again." If he'd even want it to, now that he's scratched that itch.

He might be a bastard, but he's still only twice removed from the royal

family. Not a bad catch at all.

“I’m not going to be catching him.” I make a face at the base of the carriage. “If we have to talk, can we talk about something else?”

Hmm. Julita is silent for a few minutes, as if put out by my refusal. I suppose this is a rather convenient way of traveling while staying concealed. If you have the arm strength for it. Or does your gift help with that?

My gift that I don’t actually have. I swallow thickly and rub the stump of my finger that’s my supposed sacrifice. “A little of both, let’s say.” I pause. “Did you make a sacrifice? What was your dedication?”

Oh, yes. I wasn’t going to pass that chance up. Something firms in her voice, a hint of steely resolve. I gave my lowest two ribs to Creaden.

I wince. “That must have hurt.”

For a little while, to be sure, but the devouts sealed up my flesh just like they will have for your finger. It was worth it. He granted me the gift I asked for: that when I say no to a request or demand, it’ll be heeded.

My stomach knots at the thought of why she’d have wanted a gift like that. Why her brother’s experiments must have stopped after her dedication.

I don’t know what to say. Julita goes quiet after her answer, leaving me feeling guilty that I’ve shut her up even though I didn’t want to talk in the first place.

Then the carriage rolls to a stop. Ster. Torstem steps out, tossing a few words of gratitude to the driver. “I’ll need you back by the bell for the second hour.”

“Of course, sir.”

That’s my cue.

Torstem’s feet tramp up the steps of the stone building we’ve stopped in front of. I can’t see anyone else ambling nearby from my vantage point. Two trimmed shrubs jut up on either side of the building’s doorway.

The driver prods the horse to walk on. Just as the mare starts hauling the carriage forward again, I release my hold and whip myself to the side.

In an instant, I’ve rolled off the road and onto my feet behind one of the shrubs. I crouch there, watching for trouble.

No one shouts in alarm. I smooth the makeshift ties out of my now-scuffed skirt and tug the pins from my hair so it drifts down to partly conceal my face. Combing my fingers through the strands, I step farther into the shadows between this building and the neighboring one.

The structure Torstem headed into is tall, some four stories high, with

small windows dotted across its side. Raucous male laughter booms from the nearest one. A whiff of pipe smoke reaches me from where the pane is cracked open.

That has the flavor of a gentlemen's club. Is this all Torstem has gone off to do—engage in manly gossip and other indulgences?

I slink along the narrow path down the side of the building, checking for a window I can reach that isn't cloaked by curtains. I've almost reached the rear of the building when a figure marches past from a back door, heading down the alley behind.

My feet stall beneath me. The simple tunic, trousers, and cap the man is wearing are those of a laborer, not a noble. But I know that resolute stride and silvered brown hair.

Ster. Torstem is only using this place as a front to slip off somewhere else. Somewhere he doesn't want to be identified as a noble.

Now *that* is certainly a development worth following up on.

This is quite odd, Julita murmurs as I dart after the professor's hurrying form.

I don't dare speak now, but her remark is exactly why I need to find out what he's up to. Because chances are, it's nothing good.

The gentlemen's club was around the center of the middle wards, a couple of streets over from the river. Torstem sneaks along a few alleyways, never realizing I'm creeping a safe distance behind him, and then seems to feel he's gained enough distance to ease up on the caution.

Once he's stepped out onto the proper streets, I can relax a little more too. I trail along at a distance, keeping an eye on the dented top of his cap but letting plenty of pedestrians pass between us.

Thunder rumbles in the distance, but the heavy clouds overhead hold on to their rain for now. The law professor crosses a bridge and hurries on through the dirtier streets that mark the start of the fringes.

We're back in Siltston, though on the opposite side of the river from the orphanage. Is he taking a roundabout route there or heading to a different destination?

As we pass through dingier streets where fewer people have reason to be strolling, I let myself drift farther back. More grit from the ground flecks the skirt of my dress, but that only helps me fit in better.

Torstem veers down a strip of dreary storefronts, several of the front windows boarded up or papered over with the failing of the businesses. But

the two-story structure at the end of the street appears to be doing all right.

Two dark-leaved trees sprout from its sides, melded with the walls, and cast their hunched branches over the patchwork of tiles on the vaulted roof. The door stands partly open, strains of music filtering from inside.

A minor conjuring winds around the sign above. It highlights the etched sigil of Ardone—godden of love, beauty, and sensuality—and the place's name: *The Night's Calling*.

The logo shows a crescent moon framing a silhouette of a woman's face. A placard next to the door lists the day's specials—meals and mixed drinks—but I know that isn't the main "calling" the place trades in.

Ster. Torstem walks straight inside.

A couple of women in dresses that do more to accentuate their curves than cover them brush past the gauzy curtains on the front window. Julita lets out a startled sound. *Is that what I think it is?*

"A brothel," I murmur, dashing closer as quickly as I dare. "One of the outer wards' more exclusive ones, as exclusive as anything in these parts gets."

A brash female voice filters from inside, jovial with greeting. "Tomas! Good to see you again. Let me make sure your ladies are ready for you."

Tomas? Is that the name Torstem is going by here?

I suppose it makes sense that he'd use an assumed name when he's going to so much trouble to disguise his trip here. Apparently it's far from his first visit.

I hesitate, sidling off to the side of the street so I don't look as if I'm gaping at the building.

On one hand, a whorehouse is a perfectly normal place for a man to be sneaking off to that doesn't indicate any horrifying magical conspiracy. On the other hand, there's no way of telling that Ster. Torstem is here simply to wet his dick any more than that he funds the orphanage only out of the goodness of his heart.

Even if he *is* here for no reason other than to get his rocks off, men often open their mouths when they're in the stupor of the afterglow. At least, Milo did—that was how I found out about his horrible side business.

Torstem might have given away something useful to his "ladies" inside.

Well, there's only one way to find out: go in and ask.

I don't think I'll get very far as a supposed patron. Mulling the idea over in my head, I approach the building cautiously and spot a window halfway

open past one of the supporting trees.

All it takes is a quick scramble, and I'm landing with a soft thump in a darkened dressing room. Mingled perfumes clog the air, and dresses lie strewn across the settee, chair, and vanity.

The vanity also holds several scattered pots of colored powders. I snatch a couple up.

Esmæ would not approve of the garish art I make of my face. Hasty smudges of crimson mark my cheeks and lips; smears of violet coat my eyelids.

I glance down at my dress, hesitate, and then loosen the lacing so I can tug the neckline partway down my shoulders. A pool of shadow forms at my meager cleavage.

There. That should be decently convincing.

Ivy... Julita says in a doubtful tone, but she doesn't seem to know how to debate this subject with me.

I shoot a tight smile at my torted-up reflection in the mirror. "Don't worry. I'm only going to look the part, not act it out."

In some ways, it's harder to take on this persona than that of a noble. As a noble, I can be distant and wary, and no one thinks it's strange, just snobbishness.

As a harlot, I'm supposed to let it all out. To ooze sensuality and confidence.

I'm not sure I have enough sexpot in me to ooze it, but I summon as much as I can and saunter out into the hall with a swing of my hips. As my pulse drums nervously through my veins, I prick my ears.

A couple of children who look to be five or six huddle against the wall farther down, one of them wiping the floor and another folding sheets from a heaping basket. I stare at them for a second before understanding settles over me.

These courtesans of sorts won't have access to the pure mirewort like Casimir does. An occasional accidental pregnancy will be par for the course for the brothel-workers of the fringes.

Which apparently keeps the brothel set for cleaning staff.

A few feminine voices carry from a doorway closer by. I lift my chin and stroll into that room.

It looks to be a small lounge, presumably for the women to relax between patrons. Exactly what I was hoping for.

Two of the women are sprawled on the armchairs on either side of a small table. Another is perched on a windowsill, holding a slim stick between her fingers that's giving off a spicy smoke.

All three of their gazes lock onto me the second I enter the room.

One of them shoves herself higher in her chair, her bodice sliding against the tops of her breasts, which are threatening to spill over the faux satin fabric. "Who're you?"

"Lilac," I say, in honor of my dress, figuring one plant name is as good as another. "It's my first day. This—this is where we wait until there's a client for us, right?"

The hint of hesitation seems to put the other women more at ease. Maybe it shows I'm not a real threat, not sharp enough in the claws to pry their best patrons away.

The woman in the faux-satin dress folds her hands on her lap, one missing its little finger—a common minor sacrifice, like Ewalin's. What sort of gift would a woman of her calling ask for?

Did she already know what work she'd be doing when she dedicated herself at twelve?

"I doubt you'll be in here long," the one by the window remarks. "Madam will want to get you right into the rotation."

Who knows how long I have before the woman who'll know she didn't hire me bustles in? I drift along the wall beside the door, where to my surprise I find a small bookshelf packed with assorted leather- and canvas-bound volumes.

I bring my thumb to my lips. "Is there a lot of business this early in the day?"

The window woman shrugs. "If they're awake, there'll be someone wanting it. More once it gets dark, of course."

"Sometimes the ones in the day are better," the third woman pipes up. "Sometimes they're just odd."

A couple of silver teeth flash beyond her lips—the gaudiest a fringe courtesan can afford to fill in that kind of sacrifice.

Jumping on the opening, I wrinkle my nose. "I saw a man just come in—Tomas, someone called him. It sounded like he takes more than one woman at a time?"

The woman in the faux-satin laughs, rubbing the stump of her sacrificed finger. "That's hardly the strangest thing you'll run into around here. But you

don't have to worry about Madam sticking you with Tomas."

I raise my eyebrows. "Why not? He already has his favorites picked out?"

The window woman takes a drag from her smoke-stick. "You could say that. It's none of us. Madam has some girls set up in the attic. Pampered bunch. Far as I know, they don't cater to anyone but him."

The woman with the silver teeth cackles. "He must pay a pretty penny to make it worth her while to keep 'em."

"Does he come by every day or something?" I ask, opening my eyes wide as if in shock.

The faux-satin woman waves her hand. "Nah, more like every week. But he never stays away too long. Sweet deal, really."

"I don't know," the silver-toothed woman says. "Sometimes the sounds from up there are kind of... funny. Not sure it'd be work I'd like if it's worth that much to him."

I knit my brow. "What kind of sounds?"

"Oh, don't you worry about that," the window woman says. "Cherille just has a wild imagination." She shoots the other woman a quelling glance.

It doesn't sound as if they know much more than they've already said anyway.

I run my finger idly across the spines of the books. The volumes are slim, but they're not all in Silanian—some are Veldunian, a few Darium, a title that looks Icarian—and one in Woudish.

I can't resist sliding that one off the shelf to peek at it. As far as I can make out from my layman's knowledge, it's a book of love poetry.

"What are all the books for?" I say, to avoid looking as if I'm specifically there to pump them for information about Ster. Torstem—and also because I'm honestly wondering.

The faux-satin woman yawns. "Oh, Madam collects some, and some the men bring. They can help set the mood if you need it, with the right type who thinks books are something exotic."

The one in my hand is relatively exotic. I curl my fingers around it and risk another prying question. "Haven't you ever *asked* the girls in the attic what's so special about Tomas?"

The silver-toothed woman shakes her head. "Hard to do it when we never see 'em. They're always up there. Madam brings their meals and all."

"I say they've got some sneaky secret path to go scurrying through the city at their whim," the faux-satin woman declares.

The woman at the window doesn't seem to appreciate my continued questioning. She adjusts her position on the sill, her voice turning brusque. "You'll see how it all goes fast enough."

I can feel my safety here slipping through my fingers—and it doesn't appear these women know more that would be useful.

Surreptitiously tucking the Woudish book into the folds of my skirt, I let out a hasty giggle. "I think I'd better relieve myself before Madam comes with a client. Where's the privy?"

"Out back." The window woman jabs her thumb toward the hall.

As I duck out, the woman in faux-satin peels out another laugh on my heels. "Some of 'em will like it if you get 'em wet."

I'd rather not think about that.

I dart down the dim hall, past the children at their chores, all the way to the door at the back and into yard beyond.

Weeds sprout up between cracked limestone tiles of the modest courtyard. Spinning around, I peer up at the roof.

Ladies in the attic. That's who Ster. Torstem comes to see—ladies no one *else* seems to see.

How very odd indeed.

Nobody appears to be paying much attention to what's going on outside the brothel. Maybe I can take a peek from out here.

As I slink around the building, considering my options, a few raindrops patter onto my hair. By the time I've made my decision and am clambering up the more scalable of the two trees, a steady drizzle flecks my skin with a chilly layer of moisture and streaks across the silk of my gown.

"Casimir's going to have to get me another new dress," I mutter in an undertone.

Julita laughs, though a thread of nervousness winds through her voice. *Somehow I don't think he'll mind. He'd dress up the other men too if they'd let him.*

I manage to brace myself in the crook of a branch by the slant of the roof. The attic holds no windows or other openings that I can see.

And there are multiple women stuck in that closed-off space day in and out?

The mismatched shingles dappling the roof look particularly uneven farther along the stretch of the branch. I edge along it, setting my hand on the roof for balance.

If only I could peer right through the mottled surface, make my own little window—

My magic springs up inside my chest, jerking this way and that.

I can. I can, if only I let it.

I shut my eyes and grimace. Fuck, *no*. When will it get the message?

But my power really isn't accepting my reluctance now. I can't say I'm in any immediate danger, but at the gritting of my teeth, pain spikes through my chest. The riven magic lashes at me from throat to gut like I've got a feral cat scrabbling to break free of my flesh.

I gasp and bow over the roof, groping for balance.

Ivy? Julita asks frantically as the agony sears deeper.

It's attacking me because I wouldn't give myself a magical view into the attic on a whim? Gods save me, what will it feel like the next time I really am in danger?

I press the side of my face against the cold, rough shingles, damp now with the thickening rain. The solid sensation grounds me a little.

The turmoil raging inside me ebbs by increments. When it's more a rabid mouse than a feral cat, I ease myself up and slip the knife from the sheath on my thigh.

It only takes a few furtive movements to pry up a couple of the shingles, revealing the boards beneath. There, no wretched magic needed at all.

Bending close again, I rest my ear against the thinned surface of the roof. Muffled voices reach me through the wood.

There's a soft murmur of blurred-together words, ending with, "—without you."

Then a gruff voice I recognize as Ster. Torstem's. "I understand. But you're doing so well. I'm proud of you."

The next murmur sounds more pleased.

Another feminine voice speaks up, this one huskier but louder. "It's always our pleasure to serve."

"I know it has been," Torstem says. "And our plans are so close to coming to fruition. Soon you'll be able to do everything I've promised."

Their plans? His promises?

I strain my hearing, the wood rough against my cheek, but only silence follows.

TWENTY-SIX



Nobles seem to flout typical rules everywhere they go, but for some reason they respect the college library. Even with most of the tables full and students wandering amid the aisles in the early hours of the evening, a hush fills the vast room.

I meander along the bookcases and around the tables as if I'm casually making my way to a specific reference section. In reality, I'm peeking at the students around me and their reading material for anything that would raise my—or Julita's—suspicions.

Herbal grimoire, she says as we pass one guy who's peering intently at a huge tome. *That could be a resource for darker intentions... but I'm pretty sure I've heard him talk about his studies to become a medic.*

I can't answer her here without being obvious, so I give my head a subtle tip of a nod and move on.

Really, checking up on the noble students' studies is only an excuse to wander around. I'm hoping that Alek, scholar that he is, spends plenty of time in the library outside of our meetings—and some of it in the main room rather than the archives.

I wouldn't want to be caught poking around down there on my own, but all students and staff are welcome in the library proper.

I'd like to give Alek the book I pilfered on his behalf before Stavros notices it and asks where I got it. When I explain at tomorrow's meeting what I learned about Ster. Torstem and his hidden harlots today, I'm going to finesse the story a little.

The men don't need to know I painted myself up as a prostitute.

If Alek puts two and two together after he's got the unusual treasure in his possession, somehow I don't think he's going to make a fuss about it.

The palace bell rings distantly to mark the seventh hour of the later day. I veer around another set of shelves, debating giving up my search for now in favor of dinner.

My stomach puts in its vote with a gurgle.

But then my persistence pays off. I spot Alek's messy black hair and the gleam of polished leather across his bronze-brown face a few rows down this aisle.

I step toward him—and a different figure moves in front of me with a brush of fingertips against my arm.

I freeze, staring up at Wendos's coppery features. He's got less than a foot on me, but Julita's shudder reverberates through my nerves, putting me twice as on guard as I would be otherwise.

If her brother's old friend notices my reaction, he doesn't show it. He offers a relaxed smile with a flash of white teeth. "Sorry if I startled you. You're Ivy, right? Julita's friend?"

Julita practically snarls. *What under the gods' gaze does he want with you?*

I remember at the last second that I shouldn't have any idea who *he* is. At least, not as much as Julita has told me.

"Perhaps acquaintance is more accurate," I say, keeping my voice as light as I can manage while my pulse thumps hard. "My family's from the other end of Nikodi. We didn't visit often."

That should explain why he won't remember me.

He doesn't let the subject go immediately, though his tone stays casual. "Still, I'm surprised we never ran into each other. I'm Wendos—I was a good friend of her brother's."

Julita lets out an inarticulate hiss.

I bite back the words I'd like to chide her with. Doesn't she realize I need to concentrate?

I tilt my head to the side as if in thought. "Oh, I think possibly we did meet once. I'm not sure we were fully introduced. You and Borys were just racing off on some adventure, I suppose."

The picture I painted must fit Wendos's childhood enough for him to believe it, because he chuckles. "I apologize if my manners weren't the best back then. Maybe I can make up for it now. I tried to look out for Julita after

she arrived at the college, since Borys isn't here to do it..."

He pauses and sketches his hand down his front in a hasty gesture of the divinities. "I'm worried. If you have any idea what's happened to her, I'll do whatever I can to help."

Help dig me a deeper grave, he'd like, Julita sneers, her presence writhing against the back of my skull, so agitated my scalp itches. *What a pack of lies he's trying to sell.*

Is it possible he does actually feel guilty now that she's disappeared? He's definitely evaluating me, but it's possible he's checking whether I'm a potential ally rather than an opponent.

After all Julita's obsession with him, she hasn't turned up a scrap of evidence that he's stuck with his old, awful ways.

Not that I'm going to tell him anything. I don't trust him farther than I could spit a rat.

But I'm keeping my mind open to evidence on both sides, since she obviously won't.

I twist my mouth in a regretful grimace. "Unfortunately, she barely told me anything the last time I saw her. I assumed she was doing something for school, nothing that would cause her any trouble. Do you have any idea what else she might have been involved in?"

Wendos sighs and runs his hand through his shaggy hair. "No. It took me by surprise. But if you come across any indication, will you let me know?"

I force an ingratiating smile. "Of course. I'm not sure that's very likely, though. I assume the school authorities are looking into her disappearance, and I've left them to it. It's not as if there's anything I can do on that score."

Wendos holds my gaze for a moment longer. "We'll just have to hope they turn up something and that she's all right. And if I can lend a hand with anything at all, Ivy, do let me know."

He strolls off, leaving my nerves jangling and Julita sputtering a string of curses I wouldn't have thought a noblewoman would know. *If I could reach out of your body and strangle him...*

"He's gone now," I say in the quietest possible whisper, feeling like I need to try to settle her down somehow. "And he doesn't know any more than he did before."

To my frustration, Alek is gone too. I head toward the row of bookcases where I saw him before and duck down it, but there's no one browsing the texts there now.

A quick skim reveals that this section is focused on the study of stones and soil. Not a popular subject among the elite, apparently.

I've drifted halfway down the row when Alek appears at the other end. After a quick glance to confirm I'm alone, he strides over, his mouth set in a pensive expression beneath the slanted edge of his mask.

"Is everything all right?" he asks quietly. "I saw Wendos come over to you."

His gaze flicks from my eyes to my forehead. He's at least as worried about Julita's reaction as my own, clearly.

I guess I can't blame him for that, especially in this particular case. "He didn't say much, just seemed interested in whether I knew where Julita had gone. She's pretty peeved with him, but he didn't try anything questionable."

Alek's shoulders ease down from their defensive pose. "Good. If she's right about him, we have to be careful."

"Oh, don't worry, she's made sure I'm well aware of that fact." I offer a wry smile and then dig out the small, leatherbound volume from the pocket I stashed it in. "I was actually hoping I'd run into you. I found something I thought you might appreciate. The vocabulary and the style are a little beyond me, but I've never seen anything like it here in Florian."

Alek takes the Woudish poetry book from me and flips open the cover. After a moment, his posture goes rigid. His attention jerks back to me. "Did you tell Julita about this? Was it her idea to give it to me?"

I can't help stiffening up too. Why would he think the gift must be from her?

"No," I say shortly. "I was thinking about our conversation in the archives. If you don't want it—"

"I'll keep it. I—" He peers at me for a moment longer. "Do *you* know what this is?"

My cheeks heat. "Like I said, it's not the basic Woudish I'm used to. I, er, got the impression it was romantic poetry? But I was thinking of your interest in the language in an academic sense."

"Where did you get it?"

"A shop in town," I say, which is only sort of a lie. "It was tucked in a jumble—I don't think they knew enough Woudish to tell what it was about either."

Alek lets out a chocked guffaw. "No doubt. It's poetry, yes, but from what I can tell the focus is less romantic and more erotic."

“Oh.” I shouldn’t be surprised given where I found it, should I?

My face flares even hotter. Did he think I meant it as some kind of proposition?

Or that *Julita* might have?

The words tumble out faster than I can think them through. “I honestly didn’t realize it was quite that... intense. But it’d still give a different perspective on Woudish phrasing and thought than anything the college will have, won’t it? That’s all I intended by it. I wouldn’t imagine—I’m not an idiot.”

The shock fades from Alek’s face into something more like confusion. “What do you mean?”

My dress abruptly feels too tight against my skin. I dig my fingers into the folds of my skirt. “I wouldn’t have offered it as some kind of seduction attempt. I’m a street rat. You’re a noble. Like I said, I’m not an idiot.”

Alek stares at me for long enough that I think my actual skin has gotten too tight as well. A rough chuckle escapes him.

He glances down at the book, shakes his head, and looks back at me with his piercing gaze that makes me feel as if he’s seen more than I meant to show.

“Just to be clear,” he says, low but steady, “it’s obvious that you’re not just a ‘street rat.’ And those were Stavros’s words in the first place, not mine. I’m not really a noble either. I’m a merchant’s son. A well-off merchant, but nothing compared to—” He waves vaguely toward the rest of the library. “I got here through luck, good will, and working my tail off.”

Now it’s my turn to stare. He’s not noble-born?

I had heard that determined outsiders and those with enough coin to spare could sometimes win a spot in the royal college, but I assumed it was rare enough that it never occurred to me any of *Julita*’s men would be among those. I guess Alek has never shown quite the same airs as the others, but I assumed that was more his personality than his upbringing.

“I didn’t realize. I still wouldn’t have—”

Alek waves the book before slipping it into his pocket. “I understand. I’ll take it as the scholarly gesture it was. Thank you. I just... I wouldn’t have thought you were an idiot.”

I hesitate, not sure how to interpret that declaration. Before I can sort out my thoughts, laughter and arch voices carry from the aisle, getting louder.

Some students are heading toward us. We’re not supposed to be seen

together any more than strictly necessary.

Alek takes a step back, bobs his head in a silent farewell, and hustles away. I turn, planning to amble off in the other direction, just as Anya and two of her friends saunter into view at that end of the row.

Anya spots me at once. She gives a wry giggle and aims a sharp little smile at me. “Oh, look who we’ve run into. Miss Backwater who thinks she’s too good for the rest of us.”

I fold my arms over my chest. “I’m just looking for reading material like everyone else here.”

“Figuring out more ways to ingratiate yourself with the staff, I suppose. How much higher do you figure you can climb than Ster. Stavros?”

She giggles again, even more humorlessly than the first time, and taps her elbow against her friend’s arm. “There’s something on those bookcases you might be looking for, don’t you think, Tavonne?”

A similarly venomous smirk curves the other woman’s mouth. She holds out her hand—and a book flies off a shelf behind me, whacking me in the back of the head.

TWENTY-SEVEN



I flinch and slap my hand to the point of collision. As an ache spreads through my skull, the book flies the rest of the way to land in Tavonne's hands.

"Oh, sorry," Anya coos. "Did your big head get in the way of her book?"

"I think I need another one." Tavonne reaches out again.

An even thicker volume flies off the shelf. I'm prepared enough to jerk to the side this time, but its edge still smacks against my jaw.

I resist the urge to rub the smarting spot, bracing myself for another attack. My fingers curl against the silk folds of my skirt.

I traded my soiled lavender gown for my favorite turquoise one as soon as I got back to the college. If Anya attempts to ruin this one, I might just have to do violence.

"Fantastic use of your gift, there," I say to her friend. "I'm sure your godlen would approve."

Tavonne sneers at my sarcasm. "Any book I feel I need will jump to my hand. Estera thought that was a worthy request. It's not her or my fault if someone steps in between at the wrong time."

I have to admit that would be a useful gift even if it's being turned against me right now.

My magic vibrates in my chest. I hold on to my self-control with an iron grip, making my tone go haughtily cold. "I'd have expected someone invested in wisdom to find better uses for their time. What exactly do you gain out of assaulting random people?"

Anya sniffs. "Oh, it's all good sport. We all need *some* entertainment.

And you need to remember your place.”

Tavonne has gathered both of the books under her arm. “I might require one more—”

Before she can extend her fingers, a stern figure in a dark blue uniform strides into view.

The Crown’s Watch soldier scowls at the four of us. “What’s going on over here? If a daimon’s messing with the books, you need to alert us.”

He must have heard the thumps and assumed the noble students would never lower themselves to using them as projectile weapons.

Tavonne purses her lips, and Anya shoots a glower that’s almost a dare my way.

I’d take her up on that dare—except the power seeping from my broken soul has erupted at the sight of the guard. It surges up inside my chest, thrashing at me with a matching peal of alarm, faster than I can rein in the emotion.

Men like that kill sorcerers like me.

I have to make him leave. I have to escape.

My power has basically lost its mind. There’d be no reason for the soldier to look twice at me as long as I *don’t* use it.

But it flails against my hold, rallying for me to bring it to bear.

As I clench one hand behind my back, a chill lances down my spine. It’s only a matter of seconds before I pay for defying my magic’s call yet again.

I need *all* of them gone before I fall apart.

“No daimon,” I say hastily, whipping my mouth into a smile. “I simply had a clumsy moment.”

If I take the blame, Anya and her crew won’t see any reason to keep up their harassment.

Anya’s eyelids twitch with surprise, but the guard thankfully has no patience for wayward students. He motions briskly to the trio. “Well, get on with your studying or whatever you’re doing here, then. And you, be more careful with the books.”

The pain claws up through my abdomen. My voice shakes just slightly. “Yes, sir.”

Anya and her friends laugh and drift away, tired of their game anyway, but the soldier pauses and squints at me. I set my hand against the shelf next to me, doing my best impression of a woman who doesn’t need the support to hold me up while agony sears through my innards.

The guard lets out a huff and marches off, muttering something about “frivolous bints” under his breath.

I really don’t care what insults he assigns to me, because now I’m alone between the bookshelves again.

The pain spikes through my limbs. My legs wobble and buckle.

I give in to the collapse, sliding against the bookcase. Maybe if I let my body bend to the magic’s whim just a little, it’ll lighten up its attack.

My scars sting as my back bumps its way down across the edges of the shelves. I slump on the rug, my breath coming with a rasp.

Fuck, the pain is still expanding. Because a soldier simply *spoke* to me.

My magic rakes its claws into me deeper and deeper, my heart wrenching, my lungs burning. My head reels with the overwhelming ache.

I can’t help wondering if my soul has given up on trying to have a life and decided to tear its broken self apart instead.

I had a cup of pipe fleece tea this morning just for the sake of trying again. Is it possible the stuff is actually making my situation worse?

I’m tossing the rest down the toilet.

Julita’s voice penetrates the haze of my agony vaguely. *Ivy! Ivy, what’s going on? You should call for a medic. Oh, this isn’t good.*

My fingers brace against the floor. I can’t answer her, can’t do anything else at all.

Then someone says my name from outside my head.

“Ivy!” Alek’s voice is taut as he drops down next to me. “Smite them all, what did those beasts do to you?”

He assumes I’m in this state because of Anya’s harassment. Well, that isn’t completely incorrect.

“No medic,” I mutter through gritted teeth. “It’ll pass. I just need... to wait it out.”

“I don’t know...”

I shudder, and he lets out a choked sound. “Come on, let’s at least get you out of here so you can recover in peace.”

He slips his arm around my back and propels me upright. My feet stumble under me, and my chest hitches with a jolt of deepened pain.

“Just over here,” Alek says. “You can make it.”

The waver in his voice makes his reassurance less than convincing.

I manage to stagger with him to the doorway that leads to the archives. I make it halfway down the steps to the basement before another burst of pain

spears through my gut and I nearly pitch forward to tumble to the floor.

At least there's no one else around to see it. As much as I hate that *Alek* is witnessing this attack, he had the right idea getting me out of there.

I'll have to remember to thank him for his quick thinking when I'm not on the verge of biting my tongue in two.

At my hiss of pain, the scholar curses. Bending down, he wraps his arms around me.

Alek is the slimmest of Julita's men, but he proves he's far from a weakling by swinging me up against his chest. His cool, citrusy scent fills my nose.

I'm vaguely aware of the tension in his muscles flexing against me as he hurries through the maze of archive rooms to the small one where we usually meet. There, he sets me down in one of the chairs near the desk.

"The others might have some idea how to handle this. Casimir has a little training in healing. Stavros is staff—if anyone can deal with Anya..."

He steps away from me, pulling something from his pocket. My head is swimming too much for me to follow the gesture.

Prickles jab through my lungs again, and I sputter a cough against my hand. Spittle flecks my skin.

I blink and stare at it, half-stunned.

Scarlet swirls in the droplets of spit. I'm coughing up blood.

That's never happened before. Is my power doing real damage inside me?

I swipe the evidence away against my other palm before Alek can notice. The pressure in my chest seems to have lightened slightly, but my limbs only throb more.

Then Stavros is hurtling into the room through the conjured pathway. "What's the emergency—" He jars to a halt at the sight of me hunched in the chair. "What happened to Ivy?"

Not him. Not *him*.

Of all of them, I can't let the former general suspect what's wrong with me.

"I'm not sure," Alek says miserably. "She told me not to get a medic—maybe we should bring her to the infirmary after all. It doesn't seem to be getting better."

I suck in a breath, panic splitting through my pain. "It is. Better. Getting there."

I will that statement to be true.

As Stavros storms over to me, Casimir arrives, his eyes wide with concern. Alek must have had some way of signaling them to come.

The courtesan takes one look at me and blanches. “Is she wounded?”

“I don’t think so.” Alek gestures wildly. “Anya and a couple of the women she goes around with came over to talk to her in the library. I couldn’t see what exactly they did, but they were obviously hassling her. And then I found her like this.”

Stavros lets out a growl and bends over me. “Which one of them did this? *What* did they do to you? I’ll make them pay for it myself.”

Casimir is at my other side in an instant, grasping my hand. “Where exactly does it hurt?”

Every-fucking-where. But as the men’s whirlwind of rage and worry distracts me, the pain fades more.

I raise my head, swallowing around a lump in my throat. I hate that they’re seeing me like this.

I have to make sure none of them suspect the real cause. They’d be celebrating my agony if they knew.

“I don’t know if it was Anya and her friends,” I say more steadily. “The pain came out of nowhere. Anyone in the library—it could have been a gift. Maybe someone noticed me paying attention to Ster. Torstem before?”

Stavros glances behind him at Benedikt, who I hadn’t seen coming in. “Have you heard of anyone at the college right now with a pain-provoking gift?” he barks, his stance still tensed as if he’s about to go into battle on my behalf.

Benedikt frowns. “I can’t think of anyone. Someone took a shot at Ivy?”

“Either that, or it was Anya’s bunch putting her in her ‘place,’” Alek says.

My next breaths come more easily. I push myself straighter in the chair, pretending my arms aren’t still tingling with splinters of pain. “It’s passing now. It was just to trip me up, like the drug before. Nothing permanent.”

I hope.

“Was Romild in the library?” Casimir asks, his forehead furrowed. “We weren’t sure if she might have been responsible for the previous incident.”

“I didn’t see her, but it’s a big room.” Better not to eliminate any possible suspects. The more they can spread around the possible blame, the less they can do about it.

And the less chance they’ll narrow the possibilities down to my

monstrous magic.

Stavros shoves away from me and paces the room. “I’ll ask around. Someone has to know.”

“No,” I say. “I don’t want whoever it was finding out how badly they affected me. Alek got me out of there pretty quickly. It’s better if they think there wasn’t any point. Maybe they’ll give up.”

“It’s better if they’re never capable of doing it again!”

Julita’s laugh rings out lightly from the back of my head. *Whatever else you’re going through, you have managed to get them awfully invested in you. Good job there.*

I recoil inwardly from her flippant assessment of the situation. I haven’t been trying to... to “wind them around my finger” the way Anya accused Julita of doing to everyone.

Whatever concern they might have for me, I didn’t scheme my way into it. I’m just trying to survive.

Benedikt steps in to brush his fingers across my temple. “Someone came at both of our girls. That’s just not acceptable.”

Both of their girls. Me and Julita.

Stavros pauses. “Is she still there with you? The attack didn’t... dislodge her?”

The last of the agony vanishes under a surge of frustration. None of their concern is really on my behalf anyway, is it?

They aren’t worried about my well-being for my own sake, only as a vessel for the woman who clearly did have them all wrapped around her finger. Who mostly saw *them* as tools in her investigation rather than people.

“Yes,” I say tersely, “she’s just fine. And I’m fine too, now.”

I stretch my arms in front of me as if confirming that and then stand right up. My legs hold me steadily enough.

I won’t think about the faint smear of blood I’m hiding on my palm.

Alek eyes me with obvious skepticism. “You couldn’t even walk for a minute there. I still think we should have a medic look you over.”

I grimace. “And what? Make me look even weaker?”

Benedikt rubs his jaw. “We could have the Crown’s Watch keep an eye on—”

With a stutter of my pulse, I shake my head vehemently. “No. How can I get close to anyone who’s conspiring against the crown if I’ve got the royal family’s chosen soldiers trailing around behind me?”

The bastard's bastard raises his eyebrows. "There is such a thing as taking a break."

I glare around at all of them. "I'm here to complete a mission so I can get back to my own life, and I'm going to do that. Whoever struck out at me meant to shake me up. The last thing I want is for them to see I was shaken. Or think I went running to any of you to help. How would that keep our group a secret?"

"You're *my* assistant," Stavros starts.

I cut him off with a pointed look. "And at least half of the reason anyone's harassing me is because they think you favor me unfairly. So let's not confirm their suspicions, all right? Or maybe there will be real damage next time."

He hesitates, and Casimir takes the opportunity to hook his arm around mine. "I think Ivy's been through a lot today, and she could use some space. I'll see that she gets some unwinding time. We can sort out any other ways we should respond tomorrow."

His tone is typically gentle but firm. The other men exchange a glance.

Stavros's shoulders flex, but he nods. "Make sure she's all right, work your pampering skills on her, but see that she's back at my quarters by the tenth bell."

My thoughts are still more scattered than I'd like, but Casimir's mention of what I've been through today reminds me of something much more important that went on earlier.

I catch Benedikt's gaze. "Who was Romild waiting for this morning?"

He raises his eyebrow as if bemused that I'm bothering to ask that after what I've just experienced. "I wasn't able to find out. She seemed to get impatient with waiting and left before anyone turned up."

Damn it. I turn to the others. "Well, however she fits into this mess, we have to check on the girls from the orphanage that Ster. Torstem brought to the college in particular. Determine whether they really ended up at temples after their dedication ceremonies."

Alek frowns, but Casimir tugs me with him before the other men can ask any questions. "Enough work from you, Ivy. You've had to deal with more than you could have been prepared for already. Let me take care of you a little."

I don't know how to argue without sounding totally unreasonable. And now I've told them the only part of what I learned that they can act on right

now.

Maybe if I go along with Casimir, the others will back off on insisting we get some kind of retribution against my supposed attacker. At least until it doesn't matter anymore.

“Yeah,” I force myself to say. “That would be nice.”

As the courtesan ushers me toward the wall with its hidden staircase, I realize I have no idea where he's actually taking me.

TWENTY-EIGHT



As soon as we've been swallowed up by the darkness on the conjured stairs, I give a private refusal a half-hearted try. "I really am feeling totally recovered now. It'd be enough just to go back and relax in Stavros's—"

Casimir cuts me off with a short chuckle. "Oh, no. You've run yourself ragged. I've got just the cure for that."

I *am* still wiped out from my magic's punishment. A faint ache remains in my lungs, and any hunger I once felt has been burned up by my stomach's churning.

Partly out of a lack of energy to argue and partly out of curiosity, I let Casimir guide me down the hallway in the opposite direction from the library entrance.

"We'll take the back staircase," he says. "It's not likely we'll run into anyone there."

He ushers me up the narrow flight of stairs and a short distance down the third-floor hall that must hold the dorms for the companionship division. His fingers skim over a few doors that are carved in a simple but elegant style with Ardone's favorite things. Roses sprout from leafy stems, salmon leap from rivers, and swans soar on lakes.

The godden of love and beauty would feel right at home.

Something about the doors must tell Casimir which he can use. He presses his fingers against the fourth in a swift pattern, and it swings open to admit us.

The room he leads me into is definitely not a dorm, though it's nearly as

large as the common room in Julita's. Pale marble tiles line the floor and walls, gleaming under the bright glow of the crystalline light fixtures overhead.

On the far wall, someone's painted the tiles with a mural of the All-Giver's raising of the godlen. Taking the idea that the Great God "lay with" earth, sea, and sky in a much more literal fashion than I've generally seen it portrayed.

With a flush of my cheeks, I jerk my gaze to take in the rest of our surroundings. Shelves built into the walls hold towels, sponges, and an assortment of bottles and jars. A sweet floral scent laces the air.

And in the middle of the room, next to a thick white rug, stands a claw-foot bathtub.

Gold-plated pipes rise from the floor to the faucet at one curved end of the tub. Casimir walks straight over with his usual assured grace and starts the water running.

As steam wafts from the warbling current, the courtesan turns to the shelves. He opens a jar full of glinting pink crystals and sprinkles a handful under the running water. Bubbles foam in their wake.

A crisper scent reaches my nose that somehow seeps into my muscles to release some of the tension wound up there. But even as my shoulders start to relax from their defensive pose, my stomach knots tighter. "You're running me a bath?"

"I can't think of anything better for soothing the nerves and escaping the day's stresses." Casimir flashes me a smile and ambles over to join me.

Stepping behind me, he brushes his fingertips along the collar of my gown. But the flare of heat isn't enough to stop me from stiffening when he reaches for the lacing at the back.

"Casimir, I don't think this is a good idea."

"I'm the expert. You don't trust my judgment?"

I don't trust his reaction if he sees all of my body exactly as it is. I can't keep my undershirt on in the bath.

No doubt he's seen dozens of nude women before. My gawky body wouldn't be a particular thrill.

But it does have one unexpected feature—or lack thereof.

"Maybe a bath would be nice," I hedge. "But I generally prefer them to be private. You've set everything up perfectly. Am I not allowed to use this room alone?"

Casimir pauses with his hands halfway down my back. The loosened dress slips over the peaks of my shoulders, and I fold my arms across the bodice to ensure it doesn't drop.

"You could have it to yourself," he says. "But that will make pampering you much more difficult. I'd also like to check that you haven't taken any wounds you're trying to hide, seeing as you're so adamant about not letting an actual medic look you over."

So, he does have a bit of an ulterior motive here. I can't even be annoyed at him for it, because it's out of concern.

"I'm not hiding any wounds," I insist.

Of its own accord, my hand clenches against my sternum. Against the spot just below the modest swell of my breasts where I *should* be branded.

"Ah." Casimir raises his hands to rest them gingerly on my shoulders, his thumbs stroking soothing lines over my bared skin. "It's all right, Kindness. You don't have to hide *that*. I already know."

My heart just about bursts straight through my ribs. Despite my best efforts to keep it steady, my voice wavers. "You know what?"

His voice stays gentle, wrapping around me like another layer of silk. "I don't imagine the others would have guessed. I'm trained to pick up on body language, to evaluate people's reactions... And before I started official classes at the college, one of the boys I was tutored with was godless. Some quirks are familiar."

What? Julita bursts out.

My legs wobble under me, rocked by a surge of emotion. Shock that the courtesan actually does know, immense relief that he doesn't know *everything*.

I can't see much point in trying to deny the truth now, to him or my ghostly passenger.

I take in a gulp of air and let out a shaky laugh. "Not much gets by you, huh? What 'quirks' am I giving myself away with?"

"Like I said, I doubt anyone else would realize." Casimir keeps up his slow massage of my shoulders, but his voice has lightened as if he's relieved too. Maybe he was worried about how I'd respond?

"It took me a while myself," he continues. "But I've never seen you make the gesture of the divinities, even when you're under threat. When you're tense, you sometimes shield that spot like you did just now, as if you're covering it from view. You kept your gaze averted from the Temple of the

Crown when you rode by on our return from the orphanage.”

I test my teeth against my lower lip but catch myself before I really start worrying at it. I can seem a little discomforted, but I don't want him wondering why I'm still agitated after he's shown he won't judge me.

Especially not after he's proven what a keen observer he really is.

“I was on my own for a lot of my childhood,” I say, feeling the need to give an explanation. It's a somewhat honest one. “It felt wrong to dedicate myself to any of the divinities who didn't appear to give a shit about what happened to me up until then. I never wanted a gift.”

Least of all the one I ended up with through no choice of my own.

Casimir gives my shoulders a reassuring squeeze. “My friend had similar reasons. Choosing godlessness shouldn't be *that* offensive. Our lives are still our own—the All-Giver never denied that even while watching over us. You clearly haven't done anything terrible enough for the gods to strike you down.”

He chuckles as if the idea is totally absurd, and I make myself laugh along.

He has no idea. I'm just lucky the godden don't keep too close an eye on the millions of mortals under their purview.

“There are a lot of other people who don't see it that way.” I don't want him bringing it up with the other men.

“Within these walls in particular,” Casimir says in acknowledgment. “I haven't mentioned the suspicion to anyone else, and I won't. I wouldn't have mentioned it to *you* if it hadn't seemed to be holding you back.”

Holding me back from the bath, which is now nearly full of water and foamy bubbles.

Casimir leaves me so he can shut off the water. I drink in the haze of steam in the air.

The knot in my stomach lingers.

Do I even deserve the compassion this incredible man is offering me? I'm still lying to him.

But if my magic keeps tearing away at me, how much longer do I even have?

I'm never going to get my daydream from my times in Ewalin's oak tree, of family and belonging and laughter. Is it really unfair to accept just a sliver of that kind of amity?

Great God help me, I would like to be pampered, just once. When am I

ever going to get an offer like this again?

I grapple with the pang of longing inside me for a few moments longer and then meet Casimir's gaze. "Just a bath."

His eyes twinkle with his smile. "If that's all you'd like."

The thought of all the other things he might do for other women—and men—he could have brought into this room brings back my hesitation. "You know I wouldn't—I'd never *expect* this from you because of the work you do. I wouldn't hire you, if I could even afford to. I mean, not because you're not very appealing and everything. Er. It just isn't the sort of thing... the sort of thing I'd feel okay about doing."

I'm not sure if I've made a whole lot of sense in my babbling, but Casimir's smile stays in place as he returns to me. "You don't have to worry. I don't see it that way. Think of it as—if you were friends with a baker, they might bake you a cake to cheer you up after a hard day. You're friends with me, so you get a bath."

I consider the bubbles. "It does look like a very nice bath."

"I take pride in my work, even more so when it isn't really work at all." Casimir pauses, and his eyes soften. "I'll take your word for it that there are no wounds unaccounted for. Let me know when you're ready for the rest of your pampering."

He turns his back to me to start looking through the paraphernalia on the shelves as if that's exactly what he always intended to be doing. Letting me finish undressing without any spectators.

The unstated understanding in the gesture melts the last of my hesitation.

My broken soul might rip me right in two by this time tomorrow. What have I got to lose?

I shimmy out of the gown and my underthings quickly. As I unwind Linzi's ribbon carefully and set it with the pile, Julita's presence stirs. *I can't believe I never realized. I suppose you weren't in the habit of ogling your own chest while you were changing.*

Quite purposefully, once I knew she was inside me. I feel strange talking to her with Casimir right here, so I simply shrug and clamber into the tub.

The steaming water envelopes my body in a delectably warm embrace. The sweet scent of the bubbles fills my lungs.

I exhale in a sigh, tipping my head against the arched back of the tub.

Yes, this is nice.

Not that it makes any difference to me, Julita goes on. *Even without any*

godlen ties, you clearly know right from wrong. I don't think I'd mention it to Stavros, though.

I raise an eyebrow as if to say, *No kidding.*

“How are you getting on there, my friend?” Casimir asks in a tone as warm as the water.

I hum contentedly. “I’m feeling pretty pampered already.”

He laughs. “Oh, it can get much better than this. Let’s get started with your hair. I’d imagine it’s been a long time since you had anyone to help you wash it.”

Not since I was a child of six or seven. I can’t remember if Ma stopped attending to me that closely in the bath before she realized I was a monster or only after.

The clash of memories brings back the ache in my chest, but the press of Casimir’s fingers moving deftly over my scalp soon whisks the turmoil away.

He stops for a moment with a whisper of fabric, and I realize he’s taken off his shirt. To avoid getting it wet, presumably, but I can’t help regretting that I’m missing the view with him behind me.

Kneeling, he eases my head back into the water to ensure my hair is totally soaked. Then he works a lavender-scented soap into the pale locks.

As his fingers move down to the nape of my neck, a starker heat seeps through my veins. It’s difficult not to imagine how those skillful hands would feel tending to other parts of my body.

Well, Julita murmurs. I can't say I mind getting to experience Casimir at work. He does know what he's doing. But I think perhaps I should give you a little more privacy... to enjoy yourself fully. If I can slip deeper away like I did before, I won't even know. Let's see.

Her voice fades out. The faint tingling of her presence dwindles too, until it’s the barest tickle at the back of my skull.

Did she notice some sign that Casimir is about to do something I’d rather have private? My pulse stutters.

But after the courtesan douses my hair with water, he sits back on his heels. “We have a salve that helps scars heal. I’m not sure how much effect it’ll have on older ones, but I’m happy to try if you’d like.”

I’ve never gotten a clear view of the ruddy lines that crisscross my back, but I don’t like the story they tell of my history. I’d happily see them gone for good.

“Worth a try,” I say, not looking too hard at the twinge of disappointment

that passes through me. “Thank you.”

He retrieves a small jar full of greenish cream and has me sit up and lean forward so the upper half of my back is exposed. “Do they hurt at all still?”

I shake my head. “Not unless I bang up my back. Which I’d imagine would hurt anyway, but maybe they make it hurt a little more.”

“I’ll still be careful.”

The substance he spreads across my damp skin is warmer and more slippery than I expected. With each stroke of Casimir’s fingers, I feel as if it’s sinking through the mottled ridges, deeper into my flesh.

It’s probably weird that the act sends another pang of desire through my core. I grope for a conversational subject that’ll distract me from my lustful urges.

“How did you end up in this line of work anyway?” I settle on. “You’ve made it sound as if you grew up always planning to become a courtesan.”

I’ve heard of large noble families directing their youngest children who have no chance of inheriting into the arts of various sorts, but I wouldn’t have thought they usually decide it very early on.

Casimir gives a hum of agreement in answer to my words. “It’s a family calling. My mother served the barons and baronesses, traveling with them in the royal court from place to place. I believe her mother served the same way before her.”

“Oh.” I guess that makes sense as well—that the practitioners of the sensual arts who mingle with nobility are seen as nobles as well. And quite possibly for his grandmother to have ended up in that position, she was noble to begin with. “And you wanted to follow their footsteps?”

“It’s what I was raised for. It’s what I do best.”

I can’t stop myself from craning my neck to peer over my shoulder at him. “Did you have any chance to try doing anything else?”

He shrugs as he returns the lid to the salve and rinses his fingers. “I wasn’t inclined to. When you have an obvious path to follow, and you’re happy to do so, there’s no need to go looking elsewhere.”

How much of a choice was it really, if he was told he was meant to serve others this way from the moment he could understand anything at all?

Casimir guides me back against the end of the tub. Sitting up this way, the bubbles graze the undersides of my breasts.

“You don’t need to worry about me, Ivy,” he says, as if he can sense my doubts. “It truly is a joy to see the delight I can bring.”

I frown at the faucet across from me. “I just—I don’t think anyone should be *bound* by who their family was.”

“I don’t feel constrained. But the fact that you’d say that is one of the reasons I like you.”

I think his head has dipped a little closer behind me.

His breath tickles over my neck. His hands come to rest on my shoulders again.

Suddenly it’s hard to pull my thoughts together. Too many sparks are flaring beneath my skin.

I end up saying, inanely, “You like me, do you?”

“Of course I do. What’s not to like?”

His tone is casual enough that I can hardly take it as a statement of devotion. Am I really anything like a friend or just a momentary diversion?

But then he lets his hand drift over my shoulder and down my chest, leaning close enough that his lips brush my ear, and any lingering questions flee my mind.

“Would you like me to show you how much I do?” Casimir murmurs, his fingers caressing the slope of my breast just above the nipple.

Anticipatory pleasure jolts through my nerves. I lick my lips, and any reason I could have to protest feels very far away.

He wants to do this. I’m not remotely taking advantage.

The magic I’m hiding might be horrifying, but it isn’t going to hurt him.

I can accept this for me, for all the life I won’t get to lead... as long as *he’s* really doing it for me.

My voice sounds distant to my own ears. “In case it matters to you, Julita’s found a method of pulling away inside my head to give me some privacy. She did that earlier, after I got in the bath. She isn’t really here right now.”

Casimir simply chuckles. “Good. Because I don’t get the impression that you’re much of an exhibitionist.”

I hear no regret in his tone, no disappointment over an opportunity lost. His fingers glide right over my nipple, and all I can do is gasp.

Casimir tilts forward where he’s poised behind me, his other hand stroking my cheek and down my neck, the side of his face resting against my damp hair.

He circles his finger around the nub of my nipple until it rises to his touch, aching for more. Then he closes his whole hand over my breast,

squeezing the peak between two fingers.

The rush of pleasure brings a whimper to my lips. I resist the urge to squirm my legs together to try to release the growing pressure between my thighs.

He hasn't even reached past my chest yet, and he's already conjured more bliss in my body than any man I've rolled around with ever did.

Casimir nips the shell of my ear. His voice is pure seduction now. "You're lovely. I want you to always remember what it's like to be treated right."

He rolls my nipple between his thumb and forefinger while nibbling his way down my neck. I clamp my lips to stifle a full-out moan.

Casimir nuzzles the crook of my shoulder with another hot wash of breath. "You can be as loud as you like. These bathrooms are sound-proofed."

A breathless laugh hitches out of me, because of course they are. But I don't want to think about the many ways the man with me might have made the most of that fact in the past.

Casimir eases around the side of the tub so he can slide his hand across my chest. As he gives my other breast equal attention, he kisses my cheek and then my jaw.

Every flick and swivel of his fingers sets off fresh quivers of pleasure. I shift against the tub's slick bottom, my sex throbbing now.

He grazes his other thumb across my cheek. "So beautiful with this flush in your face."

I know he's only sweet-talking now. I have never been and will never be a great beauty. But just then he dips his hand lower beneath the water, skimming across my belly to the spot I need it most, and the surge of pleasure knocks every thought out of my head.

As Casimir strokes my sex again, my head tips back with an inarticulate groan. He has his other arm braced behind me before my skull can smack the porcelain surface.

I arch against him, my breath hitching. "Fuck."

"Good?"

I can barely manage more than a mumble. "So good."

"Give yourself over to it," he murmurs. "Let the pleasure wash away your troubles from the inside out."

His thumb presses against my clit while his fingers slip lower. As I rock

with the pulsing of bliss, one and then two curl right inside me.

I moan and grasp his arm as if I need something to clutch on to or the sensations will sweep me away. Gods above and below, if I'd known giving in to carnal desires could feel *this* good, I might have been pickier in my choice of partners.

Not that I had all that many to choose from. But this man has chosen me tonight.

This man might as well be blessing me like the godden of sensuality herself with the paradise he's evoking within me.

His voice sounds a bit rougher than before—or maybe I only want to imagine that. “I have you. Come all the way with me.”

The water ripples around me with the jerking of my hips. Casimir pumps his hand faster, thrusting deeper into the welcoming slickness inside me, and I tilt my face against the taut muscles of his chest.

The heat of the water and of his body encircles me. Pleasure blazes up from my core.

My mind whirls, my nerves crackle, and then ecstasy explodes inside me.

It roars through my body, as potent as my hidden magic, sizzling through every nerve with giddy delight. My head shudders against Casimir. My fingers dig into his arm, but he keeps stroking me as the impact rolls back.

When I sag with the release of the aftermath, he slips his hand back up over my belly and plants one last kiss on my temple. “Gorgeous. You're a natural at being pampered.”

A guffaw tumbles out of me. “That—that was a little more cake than I expected.”

Casimir beams at the callback to his earlier metaphor. There's no denying the joy on his face, no way I can feel guilty when he looks so pleased. “You needed every bit of it. Now why don't you enjoy a little more of a soak, and I'll find you the fluffiest towel we possess?”

When I climb out of the tub, the towel he picks out for me does feel like it's made of a blend of velvet and cloud. I allow myself to snuggle in it for a few moments before getting to the practical business of drying myself off. Casimir rubs my hair down with a smaller towel.

It's hard to feel self-consciousness about my nakedness when he's just gotten so very familiar with my body. There's nothing provocative about the way he handles me now as his usual warmly vibrant self.

Maybe getting someone off really is no more intimate to him than

whipping up a pastry. It's easier for me to accept what happened if I assume so.

After the courtesan has re-laced my gown, he stops me by the door with his hand at my cheek. "It was a pleasure spending this time with you, Ivy."

The words and his touch send a renewed tingle straight down the middle of me.

My face flares all over again, but I've regained my wits enough to reply, "Even more so for me than for you, I'd imagine."

His dark eyes gleam. "You might be surprised."

I practically float through the halls and up the stairs to Stavros's quarters. I only come to earth when I push open the door... and find the former general sitting on the edge of his desk, his gaze shooting straight to me like he's been waiting for my arrival since the moment I left the archives.

Stavros's gaze sweeps over me. I'm abruptly twice as aware of the dampness of my hair and the freshly-washed rosininess of my skin, which no doubt tell at least part of the story of what Casimir and I got up to.

I don't know if Stavros can guess the rest. A muscle ticks in his jaw.

His gaze lifts and sears into mine for a few awkward beats of my heart before he straightens up.

"Casimir looked after you his way," he says, his cocky voice marred by the hint of a growl in it. "And I'm going to look after you mine. Starting tomorrow, I'm going to need your assistance from breakfast to evening bell. If anyone wants to so much as aim a poisonous look at you, they'll have to get through me first."

TWENTY-NINE



Stavros's new intense "need" for assistance puts a significant damper on what little social life I was developing. When Esmae catches me outside the dining hall, arriving for breakfast while we're just leaving after an early one, I feel like I haven't seen her in a year.

"Your employer is keeping you awfully busy these days," she says with a sympathetic smile when I stop to say hello.

Stavros glowers from where he's also halted several paces away. Which is about as far as he's gotten from me at all in the past two days, although at least he allows a door between us when I use the latrine.

I offer a wry smile in return. "I'm surviving. It's good to see you, but I don't think I can stay for much of a conversation."

Esmae's single-eyed gaze darts to Stavros and then back to me. Her laugh sounds a bit nervous, maybe because he looks like a menace even when he's leaning against the wall in a supposedly nonchalant pose. "That's all right. He's got to give you a break at some point, I suppose. For now..."

She fishes in her carry pouch and produces a fine gold chain with a simple flower pendant dangling from it. A teal gem gleams at its center. "There was a merchant selling these in sets of two. I didn't need both... I thought it might go well with your dress."

She tips her head toward my turquoise gown, which I guess I must wear often enough for anyone to figure out it's my favorite.

My heart squeezes with a bittersweet pang. For an instant, I'm seven years old again, beaming at Linzi's dimpled five-year-old face as she holds out a daisy she plucked to me.

Outside of Casimir's bath, that's probably the last time anyone offered me any kind of present.

As I take the necklace and fasten the chain around my neck, a faint aura of magic prickles into my chest. It feels like one of those minor spells shopkeepers who can afford it use to encourage people's purchases.

Well, even if Esmæe bought it partly thanks to magical influence, she didn't have to give the second necklace to me.

Julita scoffs. *Cheap thing. Might not even be gold all the way through. I doubt it cost her more than a few bits.*

If she wasn't an ephemeral presence residing inside my head, I'd kick her. Nobles obviously don't understand that a thing can be worth much more than the money you have to pay for it.

I aim a more emphatic smile at Esmæe, wishing I was a better friend to her than one who has to make up lies and pretend to be someone I'm not. "Thank you. They do go together well."

Stavros clears his throat with an air of impatient boredom. I shoot a glower back at him before gathering my skirts. "Sorry. Duty calls."

Esmæe pats my arm. "I won't keep you from it."

I pick up my pace to draw up beside the former general as he strides through the nearest entryway and across the courtyard. "You don't have to protect me from *her*. She's tried to stop Anya and the others from harassing me."

Stavros lets out a disbelieving grunt. "That little mouse couldn't defend you from a fly. Are you really so overworked? I thought you were looking forward to today's expedition."

I make a face at him, but I honestly can't complain.

Yes, I've spent the past two days constantly on edge that my magic will flare up and spark Stavros's suspicions. But the truth is that the former general's presence has scared off all of the enemies I've made here.

We've been eating early or late, and I've mostly been trotting at his heels from responsibility to responsibility, so my path hasn't crossed with Anya or Romild much. But even when it has, the sight of him looming nearby has kept their mouths shut and their hands to themselves.

So far, no more assaults has meant no more flailing deadly magic tearing up my insides. I can thank him for that, as much as I'd prefer not to.

And I've been counting down the hours to our trip today.

"How long a ride should it be?" I ask without deigning to address his

comments.

“No more than two hours if we set a good pace. Mostly flat country roads, nothing too onerous. I hope you’re up to that.”

The glint of challenge in his eyes adds *Thief* to the end of the last sentence even if he didn’t say it out loud.

“Sounds like a walk in the park,” I declare, even though I haven’t ridden outside of the city in nearly ten years.

Just to prove how little concerned I am, when we reach the stable I walk straight to Toast’s stall.

Stavros lets out a guffaw when he sees where I’m going. “You’re not serious.”

“We’ve made friends. Haven’t we, Toast?” I reach to scratch the stallion’s jaw, and he does actually lift his head for me without hesitation this time. “He should set a good pace, I’d think.”

“He’ll do that,” Stavros drawls. “Whether it’ll be in the direction you want to go...”

“Let me worry about that.”

Toast makes a show of shaking his mane and stomping his hooves as I lead him into the yard, but he doesn’t put up too intense a fuss. How often does he get taken out at all by anyone other than reluctant stable hands ensuring he gets the minimum of exercise and idiot noblemen proving their bravado?

Sometimes kindness is the way to go. If he scares me off too much, he knows he’ll be stuck with just those louts again.

Naturally, Stavros has a stallion of his own, an immense ruddy chestnut that looks picked to match both his size and his hair. His current prosthetic—a narrower hooked loop of metal with a thumb-like protrusion on one side, which I guess must be designed for riding—snags around the reins easily so he can lead the animal to the gate.

His mount falls into step with him with perfect coordination. Beside me, Toast kicks up his heels with a rebellious snort.

Traitor.

Beyond the college walls, Stavros swings into the saddle as easily as dropping into a chair. Toast sidesteps when I reach for the saddle, leaving me hopping for balance, but I get a good grip on his mane at his shoulders and heave myself up regardless.

“I’m fine,” I say to Stavros’s raised eyebrow.

To my immense gratitude, Toast does mostly behave on our way out of the city. We circle around the college grounds through the inner wards, cross the river over the longest bridge, and have only a short trek through the outer neighborhoods before we can pass through the gate nearly due north of the city.

Stavros flashes a seal imprinted on a leather token at the guards there, and they motion us through without comment. We pass a line of merchant wagons and carts hauling farm produce and then find ourselves with open road ahead of us.

The former general studies it with occasional twitches of his head where his gaze lingers. I can't see anything but wild fields and neater farmland on either side of us.

Far ahead, a dark smudge of forest shadows the horizon. The early morning sun warms my hair through the scattering of fluffy white clouds.

Not even the tang of manure from the nearest farm can diminish the freshness of the air away from the city streets. I drink in a big gulp of it and start asking the questions I haven't risked while we were within the college's walls. "Where do your colleagues think we're going?"

"I mentioned that I'd heard of an excellent smith out this way who King Konram might want to bring on for arming our forces. Sadly, we're going to discover that he's off on a pilgrimage of his own." Stavros shoots a cocky grin at me.

"Very convenient," I agree, and adjust my grip on the reins. I've been waiting for us to take this step in our investigation, but that hasn't stopped a knot of anxiety from forming in my gut. "And the temple where we're actually going is devoted to Inganne?"

Stavros nods. "I suspect there'll be plenty of music and frivolity if you didn't get your fill of dancing at our interrupted ball."

I roll my eyes. "I think I can manage to restrain myself."

The godlen Inganne presides over creativity and play. She's generally depicted as childlike, with round cheeks and bouncing curls. It's hard to imagine her taking out vengeance on me even if she happens to look down on her devouts and notice my illicit power among them.

I can hope, anyway.

I should be glad we're not heading to a temple of Sabrelle, the combative godlen whose sigil Stavros bears, or of Creaden, given the royal godlen's hard-on for justice and authority.

When Toast takes a mind to investigate the tufts of clover off in the field we're passing, I give him a firm tap. "You said more than one of the orphans Ster. Torstem took an interest in have dedicated themselves there?"

"Yes, three of them. Two girls, who I know you were particularly concerned about, and one of the boys."

"How long ago?"

"The boy was nine years ago, the girls six and two."

A good range of time, then, in case Torstem's intentions have changed over the years.

The thought of all that time passed gives me pause. "If the orphans are tangled up with the scourge sorcerers somehow... that would probably mean they've been experimenting for quite a while, wouldn't it? Torstem sponsored the 'institute' more than a decade ago. I thought the daimon only began acting up recently."

The former general grimaces. "That's true. If the conspiracy has been underway for years, they've either mostly kept their experiments away from the college before now, or they've started escalating their magical practice in the past few months."

I suppress a shiver. "Maybe for those plans Torstem was talking about."

Stavros glances over at me, swaying so easily with his stallion's even gait that I want to jab my heel against *his* side. "We'll obviously confirm that the devouts are who we expected and question them about Ster. Torstem's involvement in their lives. Do you have some test in mind to determine if they snuck off to whore themselves out at his bidding?"

I narrow my eyes at him. "I think questioning should cover that too. If he was taking other girls to stash them at brothels for whatever reason, there'd have been talk among the kids." I pause. "But I suppose we'll know as soon as we see these ones whether he's roped them into the conspiracy."

Stavros's face darkens with a momentarily serious cast. "Any major sacrifices would be immediate cause for concern. Devouts don't usually offer up that much of their bodies when they're already dedicating their whole lives to serving their godlen."

"Do you think scourge sorcerers would still be able to draw on someone's gift if they were living far outside of town?"

He lifts his shoulders in a shrug. "Who could say? It's not as if we've got a plethora of accounts to go by. Torstem could have stashed them away to call on them later."

“Later as in now, it seems like.” Another shudder ripples through me with the memory of what the law professor said to his “ladies” in the brothel attic. “I’d hope the clerics would notify the royal family if they had a spat of new devotees with unusually intense sacrifices.”

Stavros’s tone turns droll again. “I’d hope no one teaching at the royal college would get involved in world-shattering magic, but we don’t always get what we want.”

I remember the agony that wrenched through me a few days ago and bite back a wince. No, indeed we don’t.

The distant ringing of the city bells is echoed by equally distant town clock towers around us, marking the first hour of our trek. Not long after, the vegetation along the road becomes unrulier until it’s sprouted up into the forestland I saw from a distance.

The horses clop along, Stavros’s stallion keeping the same steady pace and Toast huffing at the shadows of breeze-tossed leaves. I click my tongue at him and pat his neck, and he settles a little.

Stavros eyes the two of us but makes no further comment on my choice of steed. He reaches down as we pass a bush dense with small, dark green leaves and snaps off a twig.

I can’t stop myself from staring when he pops one of the leaves into his mouth. “Do you take up a horse diet when you’re out riding?”

He laughs. “It’s kindlebrush. Excellent wood for starting fires when dry, good for a snack when green. They have a nice flavor and keep your energy up. You can take a leaf if you’d like. We wouldn’t want that beast to tire you out.”

I wrinkle my nose at him but pick a leaf off the twig he holds out to me. The waxy oval breaks apart under my teeth with a burst of tartly sweet juice and a peppy tickle through my nerves.

“Never heard of it before,” I say, studying the twig he’s now tucked partway into his saddle bag. “Is that a soldier’s trick?”

“Something like that. My parents taught me a lot of strategies for getting by if you’ve got nothing but the landscape to survive off.” Stavros aims a grimmer smile at me. “My mother and her squadron were once stuck in an ambush in the woods near the Seafell Channel for a full week without supplies.”

“Ah.” I give the vegetation around us a more appraising look. Edible leaves would seem a lot more appealing if it’s that or starvation.

I shift my attention back to the former general, turning another question over in my mind but unsure if I should pry.

Stavros doesn't meet my gaze, but he must feel it. "Whatever you're thinking, you can spit it out."

"I was just wondering what it was like being raised by two generals. Did you literally grow up on battlefields?"

A hint of nostalgia softens Stavros's chiseled features. "To some extent. But after I was born, my mother was mostly stationed at the main fort in the Pinch, to monitor any bids for territory or trade interference from Velduny, Icar, or Bryfeen. Which isn't a frequent problem, so it was more of a defensive position. I usually lived with her when my father was caught up in the more active campaigns fending off Darium incursions."

"You didn't see him often, then?" I venture.

"Oh, he was still around quite a bit." The corner of Stavros's mouth kicks up in a fond smile. "His gift allowed him to travel from one place to another in a blink—he could pull that off a couple of times a day before he exhausted himself. In theory, it was to serve the army, but he used it at least as much to drop in on us whenever he had a stretch of quiet."

"That's quite the gift." Imagine all the things I could do—and steal—with a talent like that.

"He gave up quite a bit for it. A kidney and part of his liver and various other internal parts that he could reasonably survive without." Stavros chuckles. "It meant he had to give up alcohol, but he always said that wasn't any great loss since he'd never liked the taste anyway."

It's strange, listening to him talk about his childhood. Hearing the affection in his voice.

I can't quite picture the massive man beside me as a little boy, but he was one once. He had a life so far beyond the little I know of him.

The question of what happened with his best friend, the one he said a riven sorcerer killed, itches at me. But I'm not so foolhardy to risk bringing up that subject over simple curiosity.

I lapse into silence instead. And curse it all if that silence doesn't feel almost... companionable.

When we emerge from the woods, our destination lies in clear view up ahead. There's no mistaking the peach-toned marble walls of Inganne's temple, nor the kites of a rainbow of woven colors that bob on the breeze over its walls.

I've read that as long as Inganne's blessing lies on her temples, those kites stay buoyant regardless of the weather.

The temple stands on a gentle slope, with a low marble wall around the base of the hill and buildings placed at intervals up the rise to the sprawling structure at the top. Sunblot saplings sprout here and there across the grounds, their brilliant orange blossoms nearly glowing in the daylight.

The godlen's sigil, the circle with its star-like center and outward curving lines, marks the stones on either side of the gate and the lintel of every doorway. Carvings of Inganne's favorite creatures—larks, butterflies, dolphins, and otters—cavort across many a stone surface.

There's plenty of cavorting among the living inhabitants of the temple as well. Devouts dressed in orange robes sprawl in the grassy courtyards and sway to the music a few of their fellows are piping and strumming into the air. I spot a line of figures playing leapfrog through the garden and an artist smearing paint across one of the building's walls in a vague image that might represent a sunrise.

Laughter bounces off the buildings. Actual butterflies flutter between the many flowering plants growing haphazardly throughout the grounds. Toast stares at one that glides over the wall and nickers when it lands on his nose.

We take all this in from the gate, neither of us feeling totally comfortable marching straight in without an invitation. There are no guards, and none of the devouts seem to be paying attention to our arrival.

Well, Julita says, it certainly is an... interesting place.

She sounds as if she'd prefer to flee in the opposite direction.

When no one greets us after a few minutes, I exchange a glance with Stavros. He swings off his horse and ties the stallion to a tree near the gate, so I do the same with Toast.

"There's some good grass here, and I've left you enough rein to reach it," I tell my steed. "Be good."

Ignoring the stallion's incredulous look at my command, I hurry over to join Stavros.

The magical atmosphere of this temple isn't as intense as the towering Temple of the Crown in Florian, but a tingle wriggles into my skin as I pass through the gate. I resist the urge to rub my arms against it.

I'm here for a good cause, not to do harm. Out of all the godlen, surely Inganne would see my current motives as more important than my past actions.

Stavros peers around us as we continue into the temple's grounds, searching for someone in charge. But having seen the way Inganne's devouts worship her, I'm even less sure that they really go for authority figures around here.

"Welcome!" several cheerful voices call out, but then the joyful figures go back to their pastimes. I can't wrap my head around being that unconcerned, full of pure contentment.

Finally, as we reach the largest building at the top of the slope, a white-haired man with a wizened face steps out to meet us properly. The ornate clasp on his robe marks him as a cleric. He glances us over with a twinkle in his bright blue eyes that reminds me a little of Casimir.

Well, Inganne and Ardone *are* said to be sisters in joy, just rather different aspects of the emotion.

"Welcome and blessings, esteemed visitors," the cleric says with a dip of his head. "What brings you to the Temple of Artful Dreams?"

Stavros must have encountered devouts of Inganne before, because he doesn't look all that taken aback by our reception. He bows his head in turn to the cleric.

"I'm sorry to interrupt your worship," he says smoothly. "There are three devouts we believe serve at this temple who we'd like to speak with, if possible. Privately. They may have information from their time before their dedication that would benefit the royal family."

"I'm sure they could spare a moment for that cause. Come inside and give me their names, and I'll bring them to you."

He leads us to a small room with mismatched chairs and paint splattered across the walls in chaotic fashion.

Once he's left with the names Stavros gave him, the former general leans back in his chair and takes in the space with a bemused expression. "They do know how to entertain themselves."

I sink deeper into the plush cushions of my seat. "I suppose that's all Inganne really wants from them."

"I wonder."

The cleric ushers in the boy first, really a gangly young man now twenty-one, with wayward hair that looks as if it's been splashed with paint too. He plops himself in one of the chairs and offers us an easy grin. "Cezari said you wanted to ask me about something?"

He certainly doesn't look traumatized or in the grips of dark magic. It

takes me several seconds to even spot his sacrifice—a pale scar in the tan skin of his forearm, about the size of a thumbprint. The kind of sacrifice people make when they're barely asking for a gift at all, just wanting to show their devotion.

Ster. Torstem wouldn't be siphoning any major powers from this guy.

Stavros leans forward, no doubt taking in the same details I have. The idea is for him to do most of the talking and me to observe, jumping in if I catch anything he's missed. "I understand you spent most of your childhood at the Riverside Institute in Siltston."

"Oh, yes," the guy says with a laugh. "Not a bad place to grow up."

"A professor from Sovereign College took a bit of an interest in you, offering some guidance?"

The guy nods, looking pleased that he's able to confirm it. "That's right. Torstem. He helped me figure out where I was meant to go. I'm grateful for that."

His enthusiasm appears totally genuine to me.

Stavros offers him a warmer smile than he usually aims at me. "I'm glad to hear it. What did you think of the college when he took you to visit?"

The guy's gaze turns a bit distant. He rubs his fingers together in his lap, and a tickle of apprehension quivers down my spine.

"Oh, it was very impressive," he says. "All those buildings, so many people—the fine clothes and all. Not a place where I belonged, but it shows how the godlen smile on Silana."

"Did Ster. Torstem mention anything in particular he might want you to help *him* with?" Stavros asks. "Something you could contribute to?"

The guy knits his brow. "Not that I can think of. He said he wanted to make sure I fulfilled my potential."

After a couple more dead-end questions, Stavros dismisses our first interviewee. His grin slants crookedly. "Well, that got us a whole lot of nothing."

"I don't know."

I hesitate, and Stavros's gaze darts to me.

"What?" he demands, suddenly sounding every bit the general.

I hold up my hands. "I could be wrong. I'm not an expert. But I got the impression that when he talked about seeing the college, he was lying."

"You think something went on during the trip that he's hiding?"

"Not like that... More like he was inventing what he said about it in

general.” I frown. “But that doesn’t make any sense. He sounded honest the rest of the time.”

Stavros hums thoughtfully. “Well, let’s see what we get out of the other two.”

Fyrinth, the older girl who’s now eighteen, answers much the same as her male counterpart did, though partly distracted by the butterfly she seems to have trained to circle her head. I have the sense that she too takes a little more effort to remember her trip to the college than she does anything else we ask her about.

Was the campus really that forgettable for kids who’d probably never been out of the fringes before?

I study her as I fit in a question of my own toward the end. “Were there any other girls Torstem took under his wing at the orphanage who seemed uneasy about his guidance? Or who talked about maybe going in a different direction than dedicating themselves to a temple?”

Fyrinth merely looks puzzled. “Not that I can think of. We were all grateful that he took an interest in our futures at all.”

Her only sacrifice is the common one of a little finger, which possibly is what has allowed her to do this trick with the butterfly. When Stavros asks her about her choice, her smile turns a bit sad. “My mother had the same. I miss her a lot.”

She must have come to the orphanage old enough to have known her parents. My throat tightens with sympathy.

The younger girl, Delja, tumbles into the room with a cartwheel and perches on the top of the chair back with her feet on the seat cushion. “It’s a glorious day, isn’t it?” she chirps.

Well, the fourteen-year-old doesn’t look particularly disturbed either. And she quickly informs us that she opted to make no sacrifice at all, “Because Inganne was happy to have me either way.”

She’s just as pleased with Torstem’s presence in her life as the other two. And she rattles on at more length about her trip to the college. “I got to have lunch there. Never tasted food that good before! And there was an amazing statue of Inganne riding a dolphin—just beautiful.”

Stavros’s eyes flicker, but he doesn’t show any other sign of concern through the rest of his questions.

When I ask, Delja claims she never saw any hint of trouble around Torstem’s visits. “He really was so nice!”

After she's left, Stavros eases back in his chair. His forehead has furrowed. "There's no statue of Inganne riding a dolphin at the college."

Julita's presence stills in the back of my head. *That's true. I've never seen it. But she'd have visited before I enrolled.*

I pause. "Is it possible there *was* and it was taken down? You've been teaching for less than a year, haven't you?"

"I suppose. We'll have to consult with Aleksi—he knows everything about everything." He sighs. "Not that it would tell us much even if I'm right."

"Yeah. What does it say if Torstem didn't actually take these three to the college like he said he was? Even if he did something else with them or somehow messed with their memories of what they saw there, he obviously hasn't used them for any evil purpose."

"Exactly." Stavros rubs his brow. "I don't like it. We've gotten no evidence at all that he's done anything except help a handful of kids determine their ideal path. Which isn't any kind of crime."

As we thank Cleric Cezari and make our way back to the horses, my stomach sinks despite the admittedly glorious day around us. I wait until we've reached the forest before speaking up again.

"We haven't tackled every avenue. There's still the matter of the women in the attic at *The Night's Calling*."

Stavros nods. "I could pull some strings and have the Crown's Watch conduct a raid, come up with false pretenses so we don't tip anyone off that it's because of Ster. Torstem. It'll take a little time to arrange."

"Maybe that will get us somewhere."

"Perhaps." Stavros glances sideways at me. "Or you might have to accept that the law professor is nothing more than a leech who makes grand promises and has an unexpectedly generous soul. What does Julita make of all this, Thief?"

The question jabs at me more than it should.

Julia speaks up without further prompting. *Ster. Torstem gives me the creeps, but I haven't seen any direct evidence of scourge sorcery around him. This is all just... very odd.*

"She thinks it's strange and she doesn't like Torstem, but she hasn't picked up on anything specific," I paraphrase. My gut has gotten as heavy as if I've swallowed a heap of stones.

All my sneaking and spying, and we don't seem to be any closer to

finding the culprits than Julita was before her death.

The gloom of that knowledge hangs over me the whole ride back to Florian. I'm only rattled out of my melancholy by a frantic ringing that peals on and on as we pass the city walls.

Stavros stares toward the distant spires of the capital hill. "That sounds like the palace bell."

"And, what, it's fifty o'clock?"

"Something's wrong."

He nudges his stallion to a canter, and I urge Toast after him. Thankfully my steed is more concerned with proving he can keep pace with the grander animal than defying orders.

We clatter over the bridge and across the cobblestones to the throughway between the Temple of the Crown and the adjoining outer walls of the college and palace. The road there is crowded with people, all looking up at the still ringing bell.

Several soldiers stand among gawkers, and I spot other dark blue uniforms in the tower around the bell.

I ease Toast closer to Stavros amid the mass of inner-warders. "Do you think it's the daimon lashing out again?"

Have they moved to the palace now? That... seems particularly unpromising.

Stavros's jaw has clenched. "If so, it appears the Crown's Watch is—"

The latest peal cuts off with an echoing *crack*. And then a clatter.

The enormous tower bell splits right in two, the pieces banging against the walls.

As my jaw goes slack, one immense chunk teeters right through the broad, paneless window and plummets toward the palace courtyard below.

THIRTY



“That was a good attempt,” I say to the military student who’s just come to a panting stop next to me on the training field. I nod toward the cluster of trees where she and her team have been attempting to carry out a mock assassination attempt on the leader of the opposite team. “Sticking low to the ground is an effective strategy, but if you can make your way into the trees, people are even less likely to look up.”

The woman lets out a breathless laugh. “I’ll keep that in mind if we do this again. You’ve conducted a lot of assassinations, huh?”

I let out a laugh of my own, even though I know she’s assuming I’ve never done anything remotely criminal in my supposedly noble life. “Oh, yes. Our keep’s spiders and centipedes lived in terror of me.”

A couple of her teammates jog over to us in disgrace. One of the guys rakes his fingers back through his spiky hair. “All right, this was a lot harder than I expected.” He tips his head to me. “Your tips did help, though.”

I shouldn’t enjoy the glow of pride that lights in me at his acknowledgment, buoyed by the other student’s friendly banter. If I’m gaining some respect as well as enemies while assisting with Stavros’s classes, it’s all based on a lie.

But that doesn’t stop the acknowledgment from feeling good.

In the palace tower across the wall, the smaller bell that’s serving as a temporary replacement lets out a couple of dings to mark the hour.

“All right, ladies and gents,” Stavros calls from across halfway the field. “I think I’ve made my point. I want you to remember that the soldiers you’ll be sending into any actual battle, all the way down to the infantry, are real

people with real lives, not mere fodder for your plans. Some risks cost too much.”

He claps his hands and offers a wry smile. “But you successfully got yourselves out of the last half of a lecture, so I suppose it’s a victory on both sides after all.”

He brought his military strategy class out here for an impromptu challenge after the guy who just acknowledged my tips asked why an army wouldn’t simply kill the opposing commander and leave the rest of the enemy forces in disarray. Stavros felt showing them that it’s hardly a simple task would be more effective than merely telling them so.

Or maybe he doesn’t like being shut away in the classrooms any more than many of his students do. He keeps up the same confident, nonchalant air wherever he goes, but to my eyes, he never looks totally comfortable standing behind a lectern.

I give myself a mental shake. I shouldn’t be spending enough time worrying about the former general’s comfort to have noticed.

The woman who reached me first glances toward the bell tower, her expression darkening. “I wonder how long it’ll take them to properly replace that huge thing. It was the daimon running wild that broke it, wasn’t it?”

The guy with the spiky hair chuckles humorlessly. “I heard they had a whole squad of guards over there trying to calm the situation—not that it worked—so I suppose so. I don’t know if we should be glad they didn’t batter the college again or worried what it means that they’re taking their new kind of mischief farther.”

His companion swipes his hand across his mouth, which sets in a grim line. “I’ve heard talk that it’s a sign there’s something’s off with the royal family. The spirits are unsettled by how they’re running things, including the college.”

A soft but startled voice breaks in from behind me. “Who said that?”

I jerk around to see Petra, the standoffish but elegant girl Julita pointed out to me during the hunt, studying the guy with her dark brown eyes. I’m not sure why she’s even sitting in on the strategy class when she’s associated with the leadership division, but maybe whatever territory she’s hoping to rule over is in a contentious area.

The guy who mentioned the rumor shrugs awkwardly. “No one in particular. It’s just an idea people are passing around.”

The other woman grimaces. “I suppose it makes a kind of sense. I’ve

never heard of the spirits doing this kind of damage before. It could be a warning from the gods.”

It is a warning, but not because of anything King Konram is doing.

I swallow down the knowledge I know it might not be safe to share. We still have no idea how many students are part of the scourge sorcery conspiracy.

Unless we’ve assumed wrong, and it’s only a coincidence that one or two rogue students are dabbling in those dark arts while there’s a bigger problem provoking the daimon. Stavros said that even the king was concerned that there might be some larger divine dissatisfaction.

After all the dead ends our investigation has run into, it’s hard to feel sure of anything.

“We’ve been ruled by the Melchioreks since we threw off Darium’s rule,” Petra points out. “I don’t think King Konram is doing anything especially different from the kings and queens before, and the daimon didn’t act out with them.”

The spiky-haired guy nods. “That’s true too. Who knows what’s gotten them riled up? I just hope someone figures it out soon so that we can have a little more peace around here again.”

Why is Petra invested in what people think of the royal family anyway? I eye her for a moment longer and then jerk my gaze away.

Right. Julita told me she’s related to the queen somehow. Of course she’d care.

Now I’m getting as paranoid as Julita is with Wendos. Even if Petra was trying to cover up illicit magic, it’d make sense for her to encourage other explanations for the daimon’s unrest, not quash them.

As Stavros ambles over to us along with the rest of the class, the spiky-haired guy turns to him. “Ster. Stavros, you said you’d go over the final stages of the Battle of Bartosa with those of us who wanted to know before the end of class. Can we still discuss that?”

A few other students perk up with obvious interest. Stavros glances around at them and smiles wryly. “I don’t go back on my promises. But you’ll have to tolerate the classroom a little longer. We’ll need the map.”

His gaze slides to me. I can’t really contribute anything to a conversation about a battle I wasn’t present for and know less about than any of his students do. And we already put off an earlier lunch because of the timing of his classes.

To my surprise, he tips his head toward the college buildings. “Go get yourself something to eat, Ivy. I’ll see you later.”

At first, I assume he’s decided that his constant presence over the last few days will ward off any new attempts at harassment for at least a couple of hours. But as I head over to the Quadring to pass through to the Domi, I notice a familiar blond figure ducking inside some twenty paces ahead of me.

Benedikt ambles along in the same direction I’m heading without glancing back, the whole trek to the hallway outside the dining hall. Where Alek just happens to be leaning against the wall at the opposite end of the hallway while perusing a book.

Alek looks up, appears to catch Benedikt’s eye, and gives a nearly imperceptible nod. As Benedikt saunters on past the dining hall, Alek pushes off the wall as if to enter.

Ah. So Stavros made some kind of plan with the other men to watch for threats to me. I guess that’s better than him feeling he needs to personally supervise my every move.

How adorable, Julita says with a mildly scoffing tone. They’ve decided they’re not just conspiracy fighters but your own personal bodyguard as well. Not as if you need it.

My irritation at their surveillance vanishes beneath a deeper annoyance with her. It’s *her* safety they care about at least as much as mine—she could be grateful she matters that much to them.

I stride on toward the dining hall as if I haven’t noticed the subtle hand-off between the men, but I’ve only made it a few steps before a voice booms through the hallways from around the bend Benedikt was making for.

“All still and proper to acknowledge His Royal Highness, the honorable King Konram!”

Everyone in the hall—Benedikt, Alek, and the scattered nobles who were passing by—jerks to a halt and draws themselves up stiffly straight against the wall. I imitate them, my heart skipping a beat.

The announcer couldn’t seriously mean—

But he did. A man with a voice-projecting horn marches into view, followed by three members of the Crown’s Watch... and a head of dark brown hair topped with a gleaming crown right behind them.

Three more guards bring up the rear of the procession. I stare as they stop by Benedikt, and King Konram holds out his hand to shake the younger man’s. Benedikt grins at him with obvious awe.

I guess a bastard's bastard doesn't get much face time with his half-uncle.

My hands are sweating. I grasp the folds of my gown's skirt with a weird sense of gratitude that I'm dressed for a classroom lecture rather than the field exercise it turned into. As if the ruler of our realm really cares about my personal fashion choices.

As the procession continues toward me, my pulse thumps faster. With each step, the king's face comes into sharper focus.

There are the deep-set eyes and imposing nose that caught the shadows when he gazed down from the temple balcony at the riven sorcerer on the hangman's platform. The thin lips and jutting chin that tensed with his displeasure.

Those lips are curved into a reassuring smile now. He stops to say a few words to every figure in the hall.

As the group closes in on me, my spine goes even more rigid. An ache runs down my legs with the urge to bolt.

Running like a maniac will get me killed a lot sooner than pretending I have no problems here. No problem at all facing the man who'd happily approve my murder.

I don't need to wonder why he's making this gesture. Stavros's students gave an explanation enough.

King Konram is aware of the rumors and how they'll have gained momentum after the cracking of the palace bell. This is damage control. He wants to show the nobles that he's still watching over them, still concerned about their fate.

It's generous of him to take this time to soothe their worries, I guess, even if it doesn't actually solve the problem. But I'd rather he was generous enough to skip right over me.

No such luck.

When the procession reaches me, my breath catches in my throat. The king offers me his smile with a slight crinkle at the corners of his eyes that suggests it might even be genuine.

"Even in trying times, we stand together," he says, so close I can count the faint wrinkles on his face that none of the paintings show, and gives my shoulder a light pat.

It's barely a brush of his fingers. Definitely no kind of attack.

But as I bob my head with a dip of a curtsy, my power shudders inside me.

Push him away. Fling myself out of here. Put whatever I can between myself and the man who's ordered the execution of every person like me.

My magic doesn't understand why I won't do any of that.

King Konram turns with his guards back toward the entrance to the dining hall, and a tremor runs through my body. My bottled power churns and thrashes.

A matching panic shoots through my veins. It's only a matter of seconds before the backlash begins.

Everyone else is still holding themselves motionless on the announcer's command. Sweat trickles down my back, and the first punishing claws dig deep into my lungs.

I stifle a gasp.

The procession marches out of view into the dining hall. The students near the doorway stir and start to walk away—and I spin toward the nearest stairwell.

I have to get away. Away from anyone who'll see my agony and wonder why it struck now.

I just need a few minutes alone...

With each hasty step across the stone floor, the magic's frustration twists tighter inside me. By the time I reach the doorway, my gut is throbbing and my teeth have clenched from holding back the pain.

As I dash up the stairs, piercing jolts radiate through my limbs. Shit and smittings, why must Stavros's quarters be on the fourth wretched floor?

On the third landing, I stumble, and a choked sound escapes me. Footsteps thud against the stairs below me.

Through a haze of pain-jumbled thoughts, I hurl myself onward.

Keep my feet moving. Keep my mind on the door I have to reach. That's all that matters.

I burst out into the blessedly empty hallway of the staff wing and stagger to the door to Stavros's rooms.

A bump of my bracelet and a quick press of my fingers sends the door swinging open. I shove myself through just as my legs crumple under me.

I slump so fast my forehead smacks the edge of the rug. If my riven magic has claws, they're scalding now, stabbing through my nerves across every inch of my body.

I wrap one arm around my belly instinctively. When I sputter a cough, the metallic tang of blood saturates my mouth.

If that stupid pipe fleece amplified my magic's attacks, throwing it away hasn't helped anything. How much worse can the backlash get?

I'm not sure I want to know.

Ivy! Julita is calling. I can't tell how long she's been shouting at me while I tuned everything around me out. *What's happening? This is even worse than before. I don't know how long it'll be until Stavros gets back.*

That's fine. I'll ride the fit out and be back to normal before he returns, and everything will be okay.

I can't find my voice to say that to her, though.

Urgent knuckles rap against the door.

Alek's worried voice filters through. "Ivy? Are you all right?"

Gods smite me, he must have noticed me take off and wondered why. It was obvious that I'd originally been heading for the dining hall.

I grit my teeth, fighting through the anguish to speak. But when my lips part, all that comes out is a groan that'll only make him more concerned.

Benedikt's voice joins Alek's. "Come on, Knives. Let us know what's going on. We can bring lunch up to you if you're simply overwhelmed by royal admiration."

I can't even summon a hitch of a laugh.

They mutter to each other beyond the door, too low for me to make out the words.

My lack of answer isn't helping anything, but they can't get in regardless. They have to leave eventually, right?

Or I'll recover and open the door as if nothing was ever bothering me.

A renewed burst of pain radiates through my body, and I can't hold back a gasp. My thoughts spin out of coherence.

Ivy, you need help. Can you get to the door to let them in?

No. No. I shiver and squirm in the opposite direction, only making it a few inches before another surge of agony wracks my body.

Julita's voice turns more frantic than I've ever heard her. *This is— I can't leave you like this. Please. I have to—*

My mind whirls with a rush of dizziness. I hiss through my teeth, and the unnerving disorientation sweeps through me alongside the pain.

My limbs jerk. And suddenly, without any conscious intent, they shift to haul me around.

What—?

I grope for control, but I can't stop my shaking arms from pushing me

onto my hands and knees.

The sear of the magic's attack rages through my body, and I almost don't feel myself lurching up toward the door knob. Grasping it and turning—

No!

I wrench myself backward, breaking the spell, but it's too late. Benedikt rams the door wider open, and the two men hurtle inside.

"Shit." The bastard's bastard drops to the floor by my face and touches the side of my head. "We were *right* there. How could someone have gotten at you again?"

"I didn't see anyone in view who looked like they were focused on Ivy," Alek says. A quaver runs through his voice as he grasps my hand. "But maybe they used the distraction of the king's visit."

"Or maybe it's something else."

I try to speak, to say something remotely reassuring, but another cough heaves from my lungs. My throat burns, and something wet dribbles over my lips onto my forearm.

"That's *blood*," Benedikt says, his voice turning shockingly urgent.

Alek squeezes my hand and starts to release it as he moves to stand. "I don't care what she said before. She needs a—"

"No!" I manage to spit out, clutching at his hand to hold him with me. The next wave of pain that lances through me doesn't hurt quite as much as the ones before.

There. It's starting to ebb. I've made it through.

Just a little too late to escape the consequences.

Benedikt brushes his fingers over my hair. "Her breath is evening out. She can tell us what happened. Right, Knives?"

I inhale and exhale, gathering myself as hastily as I can amid the continuing ache. The men wait, crouched on either side of me like sentinels.

As soon as I think I can do it without falling over again, I push myself into a sitting position. Alek moves his hand to my shoulder in case he needs to steady me.

"Hey," he says gently. So much worry shines in his bright eyes that I have to fight the urge to lean into his support, as frustrated as I am that he's witnessed this fit at all.

This isn't time for weakness. I'm inches away from being discovered.

One small misstep, and that worry will transform into revulsion.

"I'm sorry I troubled you," I say, my voice only a little rough.

“Apparently there are some lingering effects from whatever happened last time—but it wasn’t as bad as before.”

Alek peers at me doubtfully. “It *looked* worse.”

It was definitely worse, Ivy, Julita breaks in with her internal perspective. *You have to tell them the truth.*

That’s the last thing I can do.

I manage a crooked smile. “I got a good workout with Stavros’s students this morning. It must just be that I was more tired in general.”

Benedikt slips his fingers under my chin to tilt my face toward him. “As much as I admire a woman who can fend for herself, whatever magic’s been cast on you, it’s doing real harm. Alek’s right. You need a medic to look you over.”

I shake my head emphatically. “No. I told you, that’ll only make me more of a target.”

“Not if we can stop the perpetrator.”

“We don’t even know who that was. I swear, I’ve been through worse before I came here.”

“Ivy.” Alek’s forehead has furrowed when I look at him. “Is it— With Julita in—”

Before he can finish the sentence, anger flares nearly as scorching as the previous pain. “She’s fine too,” I interrupt sharply.

Why wouldn’t he be thinking about her even now? He wouldn’t want the handy body that’s ended up hosting her to conk out.

I rein in my temper. “Look, I just need some time to rest and think through what could have led to this. We have a meeting later this afternoon. We can all hash it out then.”

Alek opens his mouth, closes it, and hesitates before finally speaking. “I don’t want to leave you alone after you just went through... whatever that was.”

And you shouldn’t be alone, Julita pipes up.

I ignore her. “I won’t be alone for long. Stavros was going over some extra material with a few students, and then he’ll come back. You two shouldn’t be seen hanging around me or his quarters anyway, right?”

Benedikt sucks a breath through his teeth, his expression conflicted.

I give him a shove toward the door. “See, I’m perfectly capable of looking after myself again. I’ve got all my knives too. I’ll survive the next ten minutes. Don’t you dare jeopardize our entire investigation over this.”

The vehemence in my voice seems to persuade them, albeit reluctantly. Alek exchanges a glance with Benedikt. “Can you come up with an excuse to stop by Stavros’s classroom, give him a sign that he needs to wrap things up fast?”

Benedikt nods. “If I can’t find him, I’ll come back myself.” He wags a finger at me. “Don’t go any farther than that sofa.”

The moment they’ve stepped out the door, I sag against said sofa, my head tipping back on the cushion.

Why are you pushing them away so hard? Julita demands. You need their help. Something’s wrong, and—

Her insistent voice snaps me back to the moment when my body moved of its own accord.

Or not *its* accord. Because right beforehand, I got dizzy like I did after Julita first moved into my head.

I cut her off, my hands clenching at my sides. “You took over. You *made* me open the door. You promised you wouldn’t try again.”

She hesitates in momentary silence. *I—I didn’t know it would even work. I thought you were dying—I had to do something. I wouldn’t have attempted it otherwise.*

She was afraid I’d die and leave her without a host too. So much concern for me that’s not really for me at all.

I lower my head into my hands, but I’m too tangled up inside to sit there with my feelings.

The cracks in my story are starting to show. I have no idea how I’m going to handle this situation now.

The thought of facing the interrogation Stavros will give me when he marches into his quarters makes me want to vomit.

Grasping the sofa cushion, I heave myself to my feet.

Julita’s presence shifts in the back of my head. *Where are you going? They said—*

I walk carefully to the door. “I know what they said. And I know what I need. Just a little quiet, so I can actually think.”

Girding myself against the pangs still echoing through my battered body, I stride out into the hall.

THIRTY-ONE



There aren't many places I can go.

After the ball, I imagined slipping away into my old life on the fringes. That feels impossible now.

I don't trust Julita's men not to come hunting me down. In their eyes, I'd essentially have kidnapped her, stolen her away from them.

I can keep out of their way, but I'd distract them even more at the same time as the daimon are ramping up their assaults...

If the scourge sorcerers are escalating their plans, the men need to be here, figuring that out. Maybe I'm no hero, but I'm not going to screw up the greatest chance of preventing a new divine retribution.

There's also the fact that I don't trust Julita not to make another play for control over my body if I completely walk away. And with the way my magic is breaking me more with every attack, I don't trust *myself* to fend off another attempt at full possession.

I have to stay at the college, at least for now. But I can seek out a little peace and quiet to figure out how I can stop the latest incident from turning into a full-blown catastrophe.

I take the little-used staircase at the back of the Domi that'll let me reach the secret archive entrance without having to pass the main library doors or any of the students who might be circulating there. No doubt the whole school is buzzing about the king's visit.

The narrow spiral of steps is cool and cramped, but I'm just glad to be alone. Other than the restless stirring in the back of my head, where Julita has decided to suppress her complaints for the moment but is clearly still

unhappy with me.

All the way down the three flights, I consider my possibilities.

I could say I have a terminal illness that I didn't tell them about before. Something uncurable and gradually progressing. It'd almost be true.

But I find it hard to imagine the men wouldn't drag me off to a medic to confirm my story. After all, none of them are going to believe I got assessed by someone fully qualified while I was living on the streets.

I could say I thought it was an effect of hosting two souls in one body. There isn't much a medic could do about that—and I don't think the men want to reveal to anyone that Julita is still with us.

Who knows how they'd react to that news, though? Would they set out in search of a new host or an alternate way to keep her around instead of focusing on stopping the scourge sorcerers?

Maybe if I say I think one of the medics themselves used hostile magic on me, so going to them could mean exposing me to worse treatment? Of course, then I'd have to create a bigger lie to explain how and when the supposed attack happened...

By the time I reach the hall of tapestries, I'm gnawing on my lower lip. The pinch of pain from my teeth doesn't sharpen my thoughts.

I don't know what the best course of action is. I don't know what will get me out of this mess with the least damage.

I pass the fading images of past royalty and military commanders in their glorious deeds, feeling awfully small in comparison. Signy seems to glare at me from her hilltop as I prod the sconce to open the conjured passage.

She took on the Darium empire's entire army. Why can't I tackle a little conspiracy of evil sorcerers?

I guess it helped that the emperor's army stood out in broad daylight with their swords and spears so she knew exactly who the enemy was.

As I step into the small archive room, a magic-fueled lantern flickers on. The stillness of the dim space wraps around me.

I inhale the scent of dust and old paper, and even though I don't have any answers yet, a little of the tension in me unwinds. I've never been in this room on my own before, but I can't imagine finding much more peace anywhere on campus than I've got here.

I sink into one of the chairs and pull my legs up to hug them against my chest. Resting my forehead on my knees, I close my eyes.

I will get through this. I've gotten through so much else before.

And with my magic's increasingly intense efforts to punish me, I doubt I'll be around much longer for any trouble I get into to matter anyway.

I have some choice over what happens to me. I don't even *have* to explain.

If I say I don't want to see the medics, what are the men going to do? Drag me kicking and screaming through the halls?

The thought doesn't reassure me as much as I'd like. Partly because I'm not entirely sure the answer is no.

I hug my legs tighter, a lump filling my throat.

I don't want to have to fight them. Even if they care more about my usefulness to Julita than my own well-being, they *have* looked out for me.

I can admit that it's been almost... nice, being a part of this little group, aside from the impending divine doom we're struggling to prevent.

Who would ever have imagined—
“Ivy?”

At the gentle voice, my head snaps up.

Casimir is standing in the doorway to the rest of the archives, a scroll in one hand. The smile I suspect leapt to his face at the sight of me falters as he takes in my expression.

I was too startled to put on a show. By the time I've plastered a smile on my own face, Casimir's brow has knit.

He walks to the desk to set down the scroll and then moves to my side. He doesn't ask what I'm doing down here so early or why I'm upset, only, “Do you want to talk about it?”

The respect offered by the question makes the lump in my throat expand. Tears I didn't know I had in me prick at the backs of my eyes.

I will them away and swallow thickly. “Not particularly. I thought no one else would be here.”

Casimir's mouth slants at an apologetic angle. “I remembered hearing about a tournament that was held here several years ago, with people using their gifts. I thought I'd check if there was any mention in the records of wind-based talents, since that line of inquiry hasn't turned up anything yet. Didn't want to waste everyone else's time if I got nowhere with it.”

I glance at the scroll. “*Did* you find anything?”

“I haven't had a chance to look yet. But that can wait. It was a last-ditch effort anyway.”

He pauses. “You don't have to talk. I'll leave you alone if that's what

you'd prefer. But I'd be happy to sit with you and see if company could be a little better than total solitude."

My next smile is a lot smaller, but I mean this one.

Only with Casimir, I think I might appreciate the company. I wasn't getting very far on my own anyway.

He holds out his hand and leads me into the adjoining room, over to the settee I noticed before. Casimir sweeps the books scattered across the cushions into a stack he sets on the floor. Then he sits at one end, leaving the rest of the space for me.

As I sink onto the other end, he slips his hand around mine again. Gingerly, so I can tell he'd release me in an instant if I pulled.

Looking down at our interlocked fingers resting at the edge of my dress, an unexpected wave of emotion swells inside me.

I said I didn't want to talk, but it feels as if my only options are letting out words or tears. So I go with words, my gaze still on our hands rather than Casimir's face.

"This isn't my life. I was never meant to be here. I don't really know what I'm doing."

Julita tuts lightly. *You've hardly been doing badly, Ivy. I'd say you've held your own impressively.*

Casimir doesn't bother with patronizing reassurances. He strokes his thumb over my knuckles. "In the area of investigating scourge sorcerers, we're all pretty out of our depth."

I lift my eyes to meet his then. "You're used to everything else around here. And even the investigating—it was Julita's quest, not mine."

His smile turns crooked. "And she badgered you into coming here, as much as we've appreciated it. Do you want to go back to your life from before?"

A bark of a laugh jolts out of me. "Is that even a choice? Our problems aren't going to disappear if I bury my head in the sand. It's just... it's all gotten so complicated."

I don't mention the latest complications, and Casimir doesn't push. "I can be right here with you through those complications, as much as you need me."

He tucks his arm a little around mine, and I find myself scooting closer automatically.

When I lean my head against his shoulder, his sweet sandalwood scent

seeps into my lungs. I just barely resist the urge to burrow my face into his silk tunic to soak up even more.

How does he manage to make me feel so seen when there's so much about me I've hidden from him?

But he does. There isn't a part of me left in doubt that he honestly wants to know I'm happy, simply for my own sake.

I can't say that about anyone else I've ever known... except maybe Linzi. And look how that turned out for my sister.

My jaw clenches against the memory, but I can't erase the ache in my chest. Because the pang isn't just about her.

What has the courtesan really gotten out of our "friendship"?

"I don't have any way of 'baking a cake' for you," I find myself saying. "The best I can think of is I could steal something for you, but I don't think you'd appreciate that anyway."

Casimir nudges his chin against my forehead. "What makes you think you'd need to do something like that?"

Oh, Cas, Julita says with a dismissive tinkle of a laugh that raises my hackles defensively. It's a sweet question, not one that should be mocked.

But one I feel the need to answer anyway.

"If we're friends... I *should* be giving you something in return, shouldn't I? To balance things out. It doesn't really seem like a fair friendship otherwise."

A chuckle escapes him, with an unusual roughness to it. I raise my head so I can see his expression.

Casimir's dark green eyes gleam, but a raw note winds through his voice, marring its usual smooth grace. "What makes you think you haven't given me anything?"

I arch an eyebrow. "What makes you think I *have*?"

He turns toward me, lifting his hand to brush a few stray strands of hair behind my ear. As he rests the backs of his fingers against my cheek, I can't look away from his gorgeous face.

"Maybe you don't totally fit here," he says. "But that can be a good thing. You notice what no one else here could. You say what no one else I know would. Do you realize, I—"

He cuts himself off and drops his gaze for a second.

When he locks eyes with me again, I can sense the resolve in his. "Jules, if you're listening in, I'd appreciate you giving Ivy and me a little time

completely to ourselves.”

My mouth goes dry. It’s strange, hearing him speak to her through me but on my behalf.

Julita’s next giggle is more awkward. *Well. Of course I can take my leave.*

Her presence fades in the back of my head.

Where is Casimir going with this? I stare at him. “She’s pulled back.”

“Good. Because what I’m saying now is just for you.” The courtesan’s mouth forms a slightly sheepish smile. “You have no idea how much I’ve come to look forward to seeing you. Even if it’s just in passing that day. It reminds me that there’s more to life than what’s inside these walls.”

He unfurls his fingers across my cheek. The heat they trail across my skin shivers all the way down to my core.

I grope for the right words to answer him. “I mean... The rest of the world is right there. You don’t need me to remind you of that.”

“Maybe I did.” He traces his fingertips lower, down to my jaw, and desire peals through my body louder than any bell. “You’ve made it seem possible to want more than I’ve ever let myself consider before.”

My mouth has gone dry. It keeps all my effort to hold my voice steady, but it still comes out so low it’s almost a whisper. “What do you want?”

He strokes his hand down the side of my neck to delicious effect. The gleam in his eyes looks hot as a glimmer of flame. “Right now? I want you. Every way I can have you. As selfish as that might be.”

There’s no mistaking his meaning. A quiver that’s pure delight runs through me from head to toe. “I don’t think it can be selfish when I’d have an awfully good time too.”

Then an uncomfortable thought strikes me. I ease back a bit. “You’re not saying that because you think it would make me happy, are you? I wouldn’t want you to pretend—”

Casimir lets out a rasp of laughter. “And I wouldn’t. I don’t think it’d ever make you happy to have someone fake their desires—and you’re sharp enough to notice. But I don’t need to pretend.”

I can’t help glancing down at myself. At my gawky frame, for all it’s prettied up in layers of silk; at the pallor of my skin that might be even more sickly than usual after this afternoon’s agony.

The courtesan touches my jaw to bring my attention back to him. “You know... I’ve never been intimate with anyone simply because we both knew

we'd enjoy it—rather than as a transaction, one kind of happiness for a different sort. It could be that straightforward, couldn't it? Neither of us owing each other anything, just finding our pleasure together.”

My voice goes rough too. “Yeah. I think it could.”

No promises, no future plans, just an interlude of shared joy. It can mean nothing more than that.

It can't be selfish of me to want it when he thinks *he's* being the selfish one, right? Maybe there really is something in me that Casimir has needed, even if his desire turns out to be fleeting.

My entire life is teetering on the brink of one sort of disaster or another. I've got to grab on to the good in it while I can.

I lean forward and press my lips to his.

With the first giddy jolt of heat as Casimir hums encouragingly against my mouth, I realize we've never actually done this before. The other night, he touched me in places barely any other man has, but we didn't exchange a single proper kiss.

He claims my mouth with the same gentle confidence he brings to every other gesture. Before he's even skimmed his hand along my side, I'm already melting into him.

I didn't get to touch him much last time either. Now, as he eases me closer against him, I trail my hand down his sleekly muscled chest. The compact ridges thrill me even through the fabric of his tunic.

Casimir marks a path of scorching kisses along my jaw and down my neck, following the path his fingers traced earlier. As he nudges aside the chain of the necklace Esmæe gave me, his hot breath sets my skin alight.

I gasp and jerk free the belt at his waist so I can slide my hand right underneath his tunic. His toned chest feels even more delightful skin to skin.

Casimir lets out another pleased hum and reaches behind me for the laces of my dress.

“It's probably better not to dislodge your clothing *too* significantly,” he murmurs against my neck. “In case we need to reassemble you in a hurry. But I can work around that limitation.”

He tugs down the gown's bodice just far enough that he can scoop one of my breasts into his hand. As he swipes his thumb over my already pebbling nipple, he grazes his teeth across my throat.

The two sparks of pleasure collide with a flare that shocks a whimper out of me. Then he lowers his head to suck the peak of my breast into the

exquisite heat of his mouth, and I bite my lip against a full-out moan.

The archive walls won't be soundproofed. These rooms are large and infrequently used enough that Alek and I have never run into any other scholars down here when we've briefly roamed, but that doesn't mean I can count on the entire basement remaining empty.

But it's hard to keep my sounds of pleasure contained as Casimir summons a steady tingling of bliss with the pressure of his lips and the darting of his skillful tongue. He attends to the one breast until I'm digging my fingers into his soft hair and his back just to hold on through the heady sensations, and then kisses his way across my chest to the other.

As he laps my nipple to a stiffened peak, he tips me over on the settee. I arch against him, my sex throbbing with need.

I didn't think I could want a man as much as I did when he "pampered" me in the bathtub, but I'm burning even hotter now.

"I need to taste your mouth again, Ivy," he murmurs, rising up over me.

I have no complaints at all about the kiss he brands to my lips—or the way his hips settle between my splaying legs. I instinctively arch up to meet him.

My breath stutters at the feel of the bulge that's come to rest against my core.

Casimir lets out a soft groan as if he's as affected as I am. From the hardness of the shaft straining against his trousers, maybe he actually is, even if I can't wrap my head around that fact.

His lips brush mine as he speaks. "I would like to caress every part of your lovely body without the gown in the way. Perhaps another time, in another place..."

I hum urgently in agreement, not wanting to think that far ahead, and yank his mouth back to mine.

We kiss and grind against each other with growing fervor. Casimir's hands caress more jolts of giddiness through my chest, and I chart the delectable muscles beneath his shirt with clumsier but no less eager strokes.

My fingers graze the slightly raised scar of his dedication brand, and I tug them away. Ardore may have inspired some of my lover's talents, but she has no place here now.

This is only about him and me.

With every rock of his hips between my thighs, the skirt of my gown has ridden up. My drawers are absolutely soaked.

Casimir presses his straining bulge against me with another pulse of bliss that reverberates through my nerves. My legs twitch around him, and a mewling sound that I hardly recognize as my own voice tumbles from my mouth.

He tucks one hand between us to cup my sex, and I clamp my teeth to muffle a moan. My hips buck to meet him, beyond any remaining self-control. My mind is hazed with pleasure and the keening need for release.

Casimir's voice comes out ragged and husky. "I want to be inside you, Ivy."

"Yes," I mumble, realizing he's waiting for a response. "As soon as possible, please."

His chuckle is ragged too, with an edge of desperation that only inflames me more. He parts the overlapping folds of fabric in my underskirt and drawers that allow for all sorts of private activities without a full undressing.

In an equally deft movement, he works himself free from his trousers. At the slide of his cock's tip over my sex, I shiver in eager anticipation.

Casimir exhales shakily and loops one of his arms behind me to cradle my head. "You feel so good even like this."

I swallow a groan of mingled pleasure and frustration and manage to mutter, "Could feel even better."

With a lighter laugh, he circles his thumb over my clit and then guides himself into me.

The stretch of his shaft filling me brings a deeper rush of bliss than anything before. My fingers dig tighter into his shirt.

As I sway to welcome him, Casimir bows his head over mine. With each thrust, our noses graze each other. His breath tingles across my lips in hot little pants.

Every collision of our bodies sends me spiraling higher. I don't know how to do anything but clutch his shoulder and jerk my hips up to meet his.

Between breaths, praise spills from his lips. "That's the way. You're absolutely lovely, Ivy. Mmm, can you take me even deeper?"

When I tilt my hips in answer, he plunges far enough to set off a headier bolt of pleasure inside me. At my stifled cry, he pecks a smiling kiss to my lips. "Yes, just like that, Ivy."

The sound of my name vaguely penetrates my lustful daze, even as the final wave of my release swells inside me. He's been saying it rather a lot, hasn't he?

Then it hits me, with a pang straight through my heart.

Casimir knows I've been nervous about how much he's interested in *me* rather than the ghost I'm harboring. He wants me to be sure that it's me, Ivy, he's thinking of while we fuck—me he's delighting in possessing.

And just like that, it's more than fucking. It's a deluge of emotion sweeping through me alongside the orgasm that's just burst from my core like a shooting star.

My nerves sing and my heart wrenches in tandem. I cling to the courtesan through the whirlwind of ecstasy, gasping with both pain and pleasure.

Casimir's chest hitches, and he pumps into me again and again, sending me soaring higher. As he shudders over me with his own release, my fingers tangle in his rumpled shirt.

I want to squeeze him to me and never let go.

I'm falling for this man. Falling so hard I've hit the broken-hearted center of it before I even realized.

I don't just want him between my legs. I want to cuddle against him and dance in his arms and ride through the forest with him and fawn over pretty gowns. I want *him*, in every possible way, so many more ways than he could have meant when he said the same thing.

My eyes squeeze shut. Damn it. How did I let this happen?

How could I not, when he is the way he is?

I shouldn't have indulged him... or myself. I should have kept my distance rather than giving in to desire.

Imagine if I told him. A courtesan of nobles tying himself to a gawky street rat—anyone would laugh.

He has a life here and even he's acknowledged that I—I really don't.

I might not have much of any life left at all.

Gods above, if he finds out I'm one of the riven—no, *when* he finds out, because I don't know if I can even hide the fact for the rest of the day, let alone however many days more—

He's going to hate me. All the warmth in that gorgeous face will drain away, leaving nothing but cold horror.

Casimir withdraws from me, but he stays poised over me, a brilliant smile lighting his sweat-damp face. I force myself to smile back at him, but my stomach has twisted.

I can't let this happen again. I can't let it hurt any more than it already will.

I can't indulge my own desires when I know how false the pretenses are. He'd never have desired *me* at all if he knew what I really am.

Something must show in my expression, because a more serious cast comes over Casimir's face. "Are you all right?"

I nudge myself upright and straighten out my underclothes between our partly entangled bodies. "Of course. That was fantastic. It's not as if anything I've experienced before could compare to a born courtesan."

A flicker of confusion crosses Casimir's face. I'm obviously not selling my nonchalance as well as I intended.

I yank my skirts into place and scramble onto my feet as quickly as I can manage. "We really should get back to the meeting room, though, shouldn't we? It can't be more than an hour before the others should arrive—we should see what we can make of those records you found before then. Maybe we'll have the whole thing solved just like that."

The laugh I produce sounds reasonably genuine to my ears despite the mix of guilt and shame searing through my chest.

I told Alek I wasn't an idiot, but I am—gods smite me, I am.

"Ivy," Casimir says with the same gentleness as always, like I'm a wild foal he needs to tame.

I can't bear it.

I stride to the door and push past it. And at the same moment, all three of the other men come barreling through the secret passage into the room.

THIRTY-TWO



Alek, Benedikt, and Stavros jerk to a halt at the sight of me. As I stare back at them, my nerves too frayed for me to gather myself in that instant, Casimir hustles after me. “Ivy, I think—”

The caustic bark of Stavros’s laugh draws the courtesan up short. All three of the other men’s gazes flick to Casimir and then back to me.

Benedikt’s eyebrows shoot up as Alek’s eyes widen.

I’m abruptly aware of the sweat-damp strands of hair clinging to my temples, of the neckline of my dress drooping sloppily at my shoulders because I retied the laces too hastily.

Of the flush that hasn’t quite left Casimir’s face and probably still colors my cheeks. Of his unbelted tunic and his own rumpled hair.

We might as well have a conjured sign over our heads proclaiming, “We rutted.”

Any remaining heat drains from my body. I yank at the sleeves of my dress—too little, too late.

Stavros steps forward with a jab of his hand toward me. “This is where you ran off to? To jump onto Casimir? These two made it sound like you were half *dead*.”

I can’t stop myself from glowering at Alek and Benedikt, who are still staring at me in incredulous shock. If I even was half dead in the grips of my magic’s attack, it was only temporary.

“I’m fine,” I snap, drawing myself up taller. I’m not going to let them shame me for an act they’ve no doubt engaged in dozens of times themselves with women who meant less than Casimir means to me. Even if that last bit

still has my own shame burning in my chest. “I needed some time alone.”

A guffaw sputters out of Benedikt. “It appears you had good company for that alone time.”

Before I can do more than glare at him, Casimir eases closer to me. “Were you attacked again, Ivy? You didn’t say—”

Shit and smittings, now he’s going to join the judgmental brigade too.

“There was nothing to say,” I cut in. “I’m *fine*. It was an after-effect of whatever magic was thrown at me before—it wasn’t fun, but it passed.”

Alek speaks up with a strained voice. “You were coughing up blood.”

I make my tone as flippant as I can manage. “Not the first time and it probably won’t be the last. Can we get on to more important things—like what this meeting was supposed to be for?”

They’ve got to be early—Casimir and I weren’t enjoying ourselves for *that* long. I guess they went hunting for me after they realized I’d left Stavros’s quarters and decided to check the archive.

“You’re not invincible,” Stavros growls. “If you care about this mission, you should be looking after yourself, not running around throwing caution to the wind.”

Why, because I might risk my ghostly passenger?

I fold my arms over my chest. “Does that only go for me? I hope to the gods you three weren’t barging around the college together, letting everyone see you’ve been colluding on something.”

Benedikt’s tone turns sharper than usual. “Yes, forgive us for the grave sin of being worried about you.”

“We were careful about it,” Alek adds, even terser than before. “We didn’t forget what matters.”

Is he implying I did?

I hug myself tighter as Stavros looms over me. “Don’t try to turn this around on us. You’re the one who went sneaking off after even more evidence that you’ve become a target, just to get your rocks off.”

Apparently the commotion has been enough to bring Julita back into full consciousness, because her laugh ripples through my thoughts. *My goodness. What are they all so worked up about? Upset because you paid a little more attention to Cas than the rest of them? Boys are such boars.*

Her mocking tone sets my nerves even more on edge.

I take a step back, my ass bumping the edge of the desk. “Not that it’s any of your business, but I wasn’t planning that. I didn’t even know Casimir

would be down here. I just—”

“You just weren’t thinking,” Stavros interrupts in a savage tone. “Clearly. The fate of the entire city—gods, the entire continent—could rest on what we’re doing here, and it turns out you’ll toss that all aside for a roll-about. My expectations were slightly higher than that, even for a street rat.”

“You made a commitment,” Alek adds. “You can’t forget about it whenever you want.”

Julita snorts. *Gods above. As if any of them would have listened to me about the problem if they hadn’t been hoping they’d get into my drawers.*

A sour taste creeps through my mouth. “I’ve kept my commitments—which I never even asked for. None of this was my idea!”

Stavros sneers down at me. “No, it was Julita’s. You made a commitment to *her*. What does she think of you throwing yourself at Casimir instead of staying focused on the mission you came here for? You should listen to her instead of—”

Something in me cracks. I release a broken laugh so harsh Stavros’s voice falters.

This is what it comes down to in the end: no matter what I’ve done, they can’t see me as anything but fringe trash while I’m dying for their fucking cause.

Well, I’m really done now.

“You want to know what Julita thinks?” I say, casting my gaze around at all of them. “She was goading me on, and now she’s laughing at the bunch of you for losing your heads over it. You really have no idea how she actually saw you all, do you?”

Julita’s voice wavers. *Ivy? I’m not sure—*

I snort to cut her off.

She was perfectly happy to take over my entire body when it served *her* purposes. I’m done with her too.

I hurtle on without waiting for her to keep weighing in. “Sure, she cared about the investigation. That’s all she cared about. The four of you were just hapless dupes to her—the people she figured would be most useful to her, the people with some weakness she could exploit to get you invested, to be sure you wouldn’t back out on her. You talk about her like she was a divine being, and maybe that’s appropriate, because to her you were definitely worth nothing unless you were acting like her adoring devouts.”

Please, Ivy, don’t—they don’t need to hear—I would never have—

“Why should we believe anything you say about her?” Alek demands, his shoulders gone rigid.

But I see the self-doubt already darkening Benedikt’s eyes, tensing Casimir’s face.

“I think you already know,” I retort. “You just wanted to believe she saw something more in you than you did. That’s how she roped you in to begin with. That’s how she roped *me* in, for fuck’s sake. But if this is the thanks I’m going to get after I’ve stuck my neck on the line a dozen times, I’ve had enough.”

I shoulder through their semi-circle around me and stride toward the far wall.

Stavros shakes himself out of his stunned silence quickly enough to snatch after my arm, but I dart out of the way and tug on the books to open up the passage.

“Ivy, you can’t just—” he shouts after me, and then his voice is lost to the darkness of the staircase.

I sprint up the steps as fast as my legs will carry me.

Julita feels as if she’s whirling in my head. *No. This isn’t good. You’ve got to go back. They’re going to think— Please. Just stop for a second.*

I dash down the hall in the direction of the secluded back door, not interested in having this conversation. Not interested in having *any* conversation.

Tears that infuriate me sting at my eyes. My jaw is set so tight my teeth are aching.

They’re just a bunch of arrogant, ignorant noble twits. All of them, Julita too. It’s ridiculous to think they could ever tackle a real disaster.

And I can’t either—not here, and not on my own. I never should have imagined I could.

Me with my riven soul, impress the godlen into forgiving me for the blood on my hands? I must have been insane.

Julita cajoled me; Julita made me feel I could be important. She leveraged *my* weakness too, without even knowing exactly how deep it ran.

Well, I see everything clearly now. I’m not going to play the fool anymore.

As I veer around the corner where the hall narrows, my gaze fixes on the small door up ahead. I have to get out through the gate. Then I’ll be free enough.

Not much chance of the men chasing me into the fringes after the confrontation we just had. Let them stew in their memories of how wonderfully perfect Julita supposedly was.

For some reason, the thought makes my stomach churn harder. My fingers curl into my palms hard enough to prick the skin.

I hustle past the final row of narrow columns before the door, hearing nothing but the pounding of my pulse and the furor of my frustrations—and a blast of air rams into me from behind.

I lurch toward the nearest column, too fast to catch my balance. My forehead slams into the stone surface.

Pain splinters through my skull, setting my mind reeling.

Wind? There shouldn't be any wind blasting through the Domi's hallways.

It was conjured, just like when Julita—

Another surge of furious air smacks me against the column before I can turn around. With it comes a brutal pain that rips through my abdomen from my back.

The searing gash of a thick blade that's just slammed between my ribs.

THIRTY-THREE



Pain floods my torso from throat to gut. I sputter a breath. My legs buckle as if they've come detached from the rest of me, and I slump down the column to the floor. My chin lands in a sticky pool. Blood—my blood. Coursing out over the floor with every lurching thud of my heart. My lips part, but the next breath I strain to suck in feels like pure fire. I think the blade that's stabbed me has punctured my lung. I try to lift my head, to look to see who launched the attack, but at the same moment a blow shoves the knife deeper into my back. My whole body convulses. Fresh agony lances through my chest. The puddle beneath me spreads. I can't tell whether the metallic flavor filling my mouth is from within or without. With another shock of pain, the blade yanks free. Something hard—the hilt of the knife?—smacks into the back of my head. My temple knocks against the floor, and my thoughts spin away from me. *Ivy! Julita yells. Ivy! Call for help! Make some noise! Stab this asshole with one of your knives! Do something.* I can't, though. My brain is rattling through my skull and my innards are in pieces. I can already feel the blood loss leaching the strength from my limbs. My fingers twitch, miles from any of my weapons. My lungs can barely drag in any air at all. I struggle to push a sound from my throat and only spew liquid that tastes unnervingly fleshy. There's no one around to see. That's why I picked this route.

I can't tell if my attacker is still there. My awareness is dwindling to the boundaries of my body—to the pain... and the flash of frantic magic whipping through it.

My power wriggles through me, tugging at me, pleading.

It could seal the wound; it could set me right. The pain would go away.

But my dimming mind keeps just enough conviction to refuse.

My eyelids droop, and I see Ma shivering in her bed as her body failed. Her skin stretched pale and thin over her hollowed cheeks. The glimmer of life fading from her glazed eyes.

I felt the same call then. I felt the surge of power thrumming through my veins, and I *knew* I could save her.

So of course I did.

I placed my small hands on my mother's clammy arm and called the magic up through my soul—the soul I didn't know was broken yet. I welcomed the power into me and from me to her.

Yes, remember that. Remember, even as the magic nags at me now.

Remember the rush of joy when her shivers stopped and her eyes cleared. Remember the healthy flush returning to her cheeks, the first steady breath in days that she dragged into her lungs.

Remember the thump that reverberated through the air from behind me.

I see that too—the image that met me when I whipped my seven-year-old frame around.

Linzi, slumped to the floor with her wooden doll fallen from her slack fingers. My little sister, as still and empty as that fucking doll.

I killed her. I stole the life right out of her.

I should have known better. Magic doesn't come from nothing. There's always a sacrifice.

And the riven sacrifice again and again and again.

I can't heal without hurting. I can't conjure joy without inflicting sorrow.

My power flails at me again, but I tighten my resistance. I will not make the same mistake.

My life isn't worth that much. It isn't worth someone else's, whoever's future my brutal magic would steal.

I was a monster back then. I won't be now.

I *won't* be.

My eyelids slide all the way closed. The world is darkness and pain.

But even the pain is getting fuzzy, as if I'm drifting away from it. From

everything. Into the black void that will swallow me up and deposit me at the feet of the godlen.

If Julita is still raving at me, her voice has faded into the distance too. My magic can't hurt me any more than I've already been wrecked.

It's all over now. My whole wretched—

A resounding voice cuts through my dwindling thoughts. *Ah, my wayward rogue. What mess have you gotten yourself into now?*

It's not Julita—the voice is nothing like hers. It's everywhere and nowhere, echoing through my veins, reverberating into my bones, speaking from inside me and outside me and yet neither all at once.

Every particle in my body goes still and silent, like the figures standing at attention for the king this afternoon. Recognizing an authority far beyond even the man who rules my country.

Who... who are you? I say and yet don't, a wisp of a thought in a final burst of coherence.

This doesn't appear to be an ideal time for introductions. Consider me a concerned benefactor. Now why don't you rouse that power of yours and bind yourself back together.

I can't tell if my body actually flinches or if it's only my mind that recoils. A wail of wordless denial rises up inside me.

Ah, the sublime voice says. Mortals and their fears. You've been incredibly honorable about the whole thing, but really, if there's a moment to set those qualms aside, this is it. You do realize you're a minute or two from dying, don't you?

My next response is also wordless, something along the lines of not giving a shit.

Stubborn too. It's a good thing I appreciate that quality. I'd really prefer not to lose what we've already accomplished here, so what if I lend a small helping hand?

My answer could probably be best expressed as, *Huh?*

I'll direct the power for you. Just a little whiff of magic, enough to hold you together until help arrives. And I'll aim the backlash at the one who attacked you. You can't claim there's any unfairness to that consequence, I presume.

Direct the power? I wouldn't even know how.

The voice can obviously read my thoughts even when I'm not specifically thinking at it. *I know how. All I need is your agreement. You want to live,*

don't you? That's all you have to tell me.

The darkness is thickening around me. My mind has turned to sludge.

I don't know how to tell the voice anything, but just for an instant, the words provoke a flicker of hope. A glimmer of light and the desire to reach toward it.

There was more I wanted to do...

Excellent. Let's try to avoid any future stabbings, though, because I have to say that...

The voice washes away with a final wave of black that rolls over my mind and drowns every remaining thought.



Familiar voices are babbling around me, colliding and interrupting each other.

“Fuck. All that blood.”

“Who would have—is she even still breathing?”

“Loosen her gown! I need to see the wound.”

“Ivy... I'll bring a medic.”

Footsteps pound into the distance. The floor is hard and warmly wet beneath the side of my face. The wetness has soaked through my shoulder.

Everything aches.

Fabric shifts against my back with a sharp sting. A groan bursts from my lips.

“She's alive!”

“You're hurting her.”

“I've got to stabilize her as much as I can. It's a clean cut, but not bleeding as badly as—”

My skirt rustles, and the sound of tearing silk rattles into my ears. Something presses against the stinging spot, making it throb harder.

I gasp, and my eyes pop open. I find myself gazing blurrily at three sets of crouched legs.

“There's our fighter.” That's Benedikt's voice, somehow managing to sound both lighthearted and raw. He touches the side of my face. “We're getting you help, Ivy.”

“Hold this,” Stavros orders in a ragged tone I'm not used to, turning to

the third guy. “Firm but not forceful.”

The former general leans closer, his handsome face swimming into view when I shift my eyes. I’m afraid to move any other part of my body.

Afraid of how much it’ll hurt... or how much it might not.

Stavros’s hand jerks down his front in the gesture of the divinities. “Who stabbed you?” he demands in a low, savage voice that could be a weapon all on its own. “Who fucking did this, Ivy?”

It’s Alek’s voice that wavers from where he’s now pressing the balled cloth to my wound. “I wouldn’t have thought Anya would go *this* far...”

Benedikt snorts. His sardonic edge could cut stone. “Not when it might mean getting blood-splatter on her pretty dresses.”

Stavros emits a strangled growl. “Let Ivy tell us.”

But I have nothing to tell them. I didn’t see the person who stabbed me. They never spoke.

I couldn’t offer a single detail about my attacker, except...

My first attempt at speaking turns into nothing more than a croak. I swallow the blood-tainted saliva pooled in my mouth and try again. “The wind...”

I sense more than see the guys exchanging a look. Julita understands, though.

Of course, she was right there with me during the attack, like she always is.

It must have been the same scoundrel who murdered me. If we find out who attacked you, we can unravel the whole conspiracy! As long as... Are you going to be okay, Ivy? For a few minutes there... You seemed to blank out completely, and then I did too. But something feels different now, like you’ve pulled through.

I don’t know how to answer her. I’m not sure I could form the words anyway.

Frantic footsteps come racing back toward us.

“Here!” Casimir calls out, his gentle voice gone taut. “Please hurry. I don’t know—it looks awful.”

Alek and Benedikt draw back as a woman in a medic’s white robe kneels at my side. The hazy thought passes through my head that white may be serene Elox’s preferred color, but the dedicats of the godlen of healing must go through an awful lot of laundry. She’s going to get my blood all over her.

Stavros shifts over to give the woman room, his real hand coming to rest

on my hair. I think I feel a brief tremor ripple through it, but that can't be right.

The medic sucks in a horrified breath and touches my back on either side of my wound. "I'll do whatever I can..."

She pauses, and a tickle of warmth flows through my flesh. The power inside me quivers in resonance with her magic, but it isn't clamoring for me to use it anymore.

An ache that has nothing to do with my injuries forms in my stomach.

The medic's next remark sends the ache burning deeper. "The cut doesn't go as deep as I thought from looking at the amount of blood. Somehow it didn't quite puncture her lung."

She stands. "I've patched her up well enough that she can be moved. We need to get her to the infirmary for the rest of the treatment."

"Will she make it?" Alek murmurs.

There's no mistaking the confusion in the medic's voice. "I think... I think she will. You must have found her just in time."

My eyelids flutter shut again.

Stavros's hand slides to my shoulder. "I'm going to be as careful with you as I can be, Ivy. You can curse me out later for however much it ends up hurting."

His tone has gone oddly tender. I'd wonder about that or the gingeriness with which he lifts me into his brawny arms, but behind my closed eyes, my mind is whirling far beyond even the throbbing agony of my partly healed wounds.

A chill has wrapped around my abdomen. I was dying, but I survived. My magic seems satisfied.

What under the gods' gaze have I done?

And who paid for it in my place?

THIRTY-FOUR



The next time I wake up, I'm definitely not in the infirmary.

I'm lying on my side in an expansive bed, tucked into silky sheets under a thick quilt. Dark wooden posts rise from the corners of the frame to form a latticework canopy overhead.

A gilded leaf pattern decorates the wall across from me, where a matching wooden wardrobe stands. Next to it hang a pair of paintings: a stern middle-aged man with a craggy face and a similarly aged woman with a piercing gaze and familiar dark red hair, both in military uniform.

At the sight, the pieces click together in my head. I don't know who those could be other than Stavros's parents, and I don't know whose bedroom would hold paintings of the late esteemed generals other than Stavros himself.

Why am I in his bed?

I shift tentatively to roll over. The stirring of the bed covers wafts a tickle of smoky pepper scent into the air that only confirms whose room I'm in.

A dull pain wakes up between my ribs at my back, and a fainter ache seeps through my skull where the knife hilt whacked me. Both sensations are far more tolerable than what I was feeling the last time I was conscious, so I'll call that a win.

The bedroom door has been left open. At my movement, two figures appear at the doorway as if they've run over.

Casimir steps in first, his gorgeous face holding a mix of hope and worry. He hurries to the side of the bed and then hesitates. "How are you feeling?"

Alek ducks in after him, coming to a halt at the bed's foot. His dark hair

droops across the top of his mask to obscure his eyes, but his mouth twists tight as he waits for my answer.

I wet my lips and ease my hands across the mattress—which is even comfier than the sofa Stavros gave me, damn him and his fancy quarters. In a careful motion, I push myself into a sitting position.

The pain in my back flickers and settles back into its previous dull state. Nothing else hurts. That seems like some kind of miracle.

The thought of miracles brings a lump to the base of my throat.

“I think... I’m all right,” I say, testing out my voice. The rasp in it clears after the first few words.

“The medics fully closed your wounds,” Alek says hastily. “They said there shouldn’t be any permanent damage—it was lucky your attacker didn’t strike you with more force.”

I remember the slam of the blade deeper into me, the sear of it through my lung.

Luck, or some other power none of them would have considered?

Casimir is nodding. “They put you into a trance-sleep so your body could finish more of the healing on its own. We thought you’d be safer here than in the infirmary.”

My pulse skips a beat. “How long have I been unconscious?”

“Not that long—about a day.” Alek looks down at his hands where they’ve closed around the bedframe and then back at me to blurt out, “I’m sorry.”

I blink at him. “For what? I’m pretty sure you weren’t the one who stabbed me.”

His stance goes even more rigid than it already was. “No one would have had the chance to stab you if we hadn’t come at you with all those accusations... I shouldn’t have gotten so upset.”

The reasons I went dashing down that secluded hall feel incredibly distant now in comparison to all my other concerns.

My fingers curl into the quilt, but I manage to keep my voice steady. “It seems you were at least right that I was in more danger than I was acknowledging. Was... was anyone else hurt yesterday?”

If I gave in to the strange voice and my magic’s demands inside me despite my best intentions—if my riven power sealed the worst of my injuries to keep me alive—someone must have faced the consequences.

But no sign of understanding crosses either of the men’s faces.

A crooked smile curves Casimir's lips. "Not long before Stavros had you brought here, a couple of military division students came into the infirmary scuffed up from a fistfight, but that's nothing unusual."

No other injuries. No sudden wounds appearing out of nowhere.

I tense my arms against the sway of my body.

Does that mean I really did just get lucky? I managed to resist tapping into my magic at all?

I sink back against the pillow rather than continuing the fight for balance. "Did anyone see my attacker? Do you have any idea who it was?"

Alek frowns and leans forward. "No. You don't remember anything?"

"There's nothing to remember. I never saw them—they stabbed me from behind. After shoving me with a blast of wind."

"The wind," Casimir murmurs, his own expression darkening. "Stavros mentioned you said something about it—I thought that might be what you meant. I did look over the scroll about the tournaments, but it wasn't helpful."

"Someone with a gift for weather or air currents." Alek's grip tightens on the footboard. "All of the students we identified with weather-related talents were accounted for the evening Julita was attacked. We'll have to check their activities yesterday afternoon, just in case."

But whoever tried to kill me must be the same person who murdered Julita. It seems a bit much to imagine there are *two* wind-manipulating nobles running around slaughtering their peers.

Before I can say so, a tremor runs through the floor.

My body tenses all over again. "What was that?"

The men exchange a glance.

"A whole horde of the school's daimon are acting up," Alek says, his gaze veering toward the window where the afternoon sunlight is streaming in. "The guards are trying to calm them down... They keep moving around, which means they're not doing much damage anywhere, but also hard to contain... They seem particularly interested in hitting the foundations of the buildings."

I stare at them. "And we're still staying *in* those buildings?"

"They haven't harmed anyone," Casimir says quietly. "And the guards insist that they're managing the situation."

Alek makes a rough sound. "They know that if we all rushed out of the college, we'd send the inner wards into a panic too." His gaze flicks back to

me. “It isn’t as bad as the ball. So far we do seem to be better off staying.”

I don’t feel entirely reassured by the explanation, but I don’t have much will in me to argue. I just woke up—I’d hope they have a better sense of the risks than I do.

Casimir lifts his hand and then drops it to his side again. “You should focus on fully recovering. Do you want anything? Oh!” He hustles out of the room with his typical grace and returns holding a plate and a glass. “Benedikt brought up food from the lunch spread for you.”

“He’ll come by again later,” Alek puts in. “He wanted to apologize too. And Stavros will obviously be back—he stayed all morning, but they called a staff meeting about the daimon situation...”

“It’s all right.” I rub my forehead. I’m not sure I want to talk to either of the other men just yet.

I’m not sure I want to talk to the men right in front of me all that much either.

I motion to Casimir. “If you could put the food on the bedside table... And could I have a little space to myself? That might make recovering a little easier. I don’t feel all that bad—you don’t need to hover. You two must have classes and everything too.”

“That doesn’t—” Alek starts, but Casimir makes some gesture that cuts him off.

The courtesan gives me his gentle smile that brings a different sort of ache into my chest. “You never did get the alone time you were looking for yesterday. You should have that. But if you need us...”

He pulls out a silver trinket, an oval about the size of the pad of his thumb, with hinges on one side like a locket. When he flicks it open, I realize it *is* a locket—a plain one with no picture tucked inside.

“Benedikt had the idea of us getting these made when we were first starting our investigations,” he says. “I suppose Julita’s was lost. Press the inside, and it’ll send a small magical pulse to alert the rest of us and indicate where we should go.”

He sets the locket on the table next to my lunch. Alek adjusts his weight on his feet as if he’d like to say more, but his mouth stays clamped shut.

Does he expect me to apologize for the things *I* said?

I’m exhausted just remembering it, but it was all true. There’s nothing to take back.

Casimir nudges him. Alek bows his head, making a quick three-fingered

tap down his front that I guess is meant for my safety, as if the divinities care about that.

The two of them leave the room. A moment after the outer door clicks shut behind them, another tremor ripples through the room.

My stomach knots. Whatever's going wrong, it's getting worse.

And whoever's behind it knows that I'm hoping to stop them.

It's too much. My world hasn't stopped falling apart in the past day. It's only fractured into more pieces, so many I don't know how to fit them back together.

I close my eyes. The tingle of Julita's presence stirs in the back of my skull.

"You're still there, aren't you?" I say. "You talked to me when the medic was first healing me."

I'm here. Julita pauses. *I thought I should probably wait and let you decide when you wanted to hear from me.*

I guess my outburst yesterday was as critical of her as it was of the men.

I grimace. "I'm not angry with you. It was mostly them. The way they talked about you and the way you talked about them was just so... different."

Something about the momentary silence has me picturing the chestnut-haired woman she once was bowing her head in shame. *They're good men, all of them. I just—I needed them. I needed someone. I couldn't take on a whole conspiracy of scourge sorcerers on my own.*

"Of course you couldn't." But that doesn't mean she had to go around manipulating people's vulnerabilities to get that support.

I needed to be sure, she says, as if she sensed my unspoken criticism. *That kind of power—the temptation of it—there couldn't be any chance...* She trails off. *We did work well together. They were always there for me. But it's not as if it was really about me anyway.*

"What else could it have been about?"

She lets out a rough chuckle. *Stavros needed glory. Alek needed to be chosen. Benedikt needed someone to see him as more than a joker. Cas needed to do something bigger than catering to patrons' whims.*

There's a weird tenderness in her tone, not like her usual amused condescension. She did know them well.

I offered them what they needed, and they gave me what I needed in return, she goes on. *It isn't as if... Even if I had wanted... They wouldn't have really wanted me, just as myself.*

My throat constricts. Maybe the things I told the men weren't completely true after all.

Because all I hear in Julita's voice now is affection and doubt. I've seen signs of her concern for them in the past too.

Just how much did she care about the four of them underneath? How much might she have wanted and simply refused to let herself acknowledge?

I know what it's like to put up walls to keep yourself safe from people so they can't hurt you. Hers just might look different from mine.

What else did *she* need when she went looking for help? In a way, she already told me.

She needed to be able to refuse.

"I don't know about that," I say softly. "And I was a little unfair in what I said. I know they mattered to you."

Julita seems to gather herself. *Well, it hardly makes a difference now. You've done a lot more than just step into my shoes, Ivy. They should respect that and you.*

I'm less comfortable with this subject the more it turns back toward me. There's one very large reason the men should never respect *me* just as myself.

I grasp for a change of subject. "What happened to your locket?"

Oh. I... When I first found myself in you, I managed to get you to slip off my bracelet. Your hand was already resting by my arm. But before I could prompt anything else, you took over again. It would have been in my pouch.

To either be snatched up by scavengers or disposed of by the outer-ward criminal kingpins.

It's hard for me to be angry about her admission when we didn't know each other at all in that moment. But thinking about it reminds me of the other unnerving intrusion in my head.

"After I was stabbed, before the men found me," I say. "Did you hear the other voice?"

The voice?

"Someone else speaking to me. Trying to get me to help myself."

I can hear Julita's puzzled frown in her response. *I felt the villain who attacked you hurt you more and then leave, but they didn't say anything. There was no one else, and then you must have blacked out, because I did without trying to. Did you hear someone else?*

"I—I don't know." Did I only imagine that overwhelming voice and its

urging? Was it some new trick of my riven power to encourage me to use it?

But as far as I can tell, I didn't even do that. Not in the way it's worked before.

I rub my eyes and sit up again to grab the glass of water Casimir left with my food. I could simply be going mad with all the chaos that's been whirling around me.

The cool liquid coursing down my parched throat only leaves me restless. A third tremor nudges me out of the bed.

I test my legs on the floor, pacing the room in the knee-length shift the medics left me in. Stavros's wardrobe isn't particularly interesting, but there's a small bookcase tucked away next to the bed that holds several volumes that look like fictional adventures rather than the dry texts he keeps in the main room.

Resisting the urge to peek through them, I walk to the window next. The view only shows me a squad of blue-uniformed soldiers marching past.

I jerk back from the glass with a hitch of my heart.

I haven't really resolved anything. I've only got more problems now. How can I lie in bed hoping those will somehow solve themselves?

I don't know what I'm going to do, but I'm not going to figure it out while napping.

Someone—probably Casimir—has left two gowns spread over the back of the sofa in case I want to get properly dressed: my favorite turquoise one and a new one that's a pale green. My knives and the straps I use to hold them beneath my clothes lie on the cushions, a pair of slippers on the floor.

I reach for the green dress, since it's less flashy. Right now, I don't particularly feel like drawing attention.

But even in that one, as I fiddle with the laces behind my back, the layers of light silk weigh on my limbs like bindings.

I've been trapped from the first moment I stepped into the college. From the moment I ran to try to save Julita, really.

Fixing a knife in place on each of my thighs should make me feel better, but the constricting sensation doesn't ease. I ignore the slippers in favor of my old leather boots that I shoved under the sofa and tuck my favorite knife into the left one.

Are you going somewhere? Julita asks. *We should wait until one of the men—*

"I don't need a guardian," I interrupt, but I do go back into the bedroom

to grab the locket. Just in case. I'm not throwing caution completely to the wind.

When I glance down at myself, even the pale green fabric looks too bright. I make a face and dig out the dull brown cloak I also stashed beneath the sofa.

It ripples down over the gown, hiding most of the vibrant color. With the hood up, I could pass for a messenger or some other servant if no one looks closely.

A little of the tension in my chest eases. Gods above, I've missed my old invisibility on the streets.

I practice a little of that stealth slinking out of Stavros's rooms. A few students pass me in the hall, but none of them give me a second glance.

Nor does the soldier who marches by on patrol, although his mere presence makes apprehension prickle down my spine all over again.

If I did use my magic and the powers that be simply haven't discovered the consequences yet... I'm hemmed in from all sides.

I dart down the stairs, not knowing where I'm going until an unfortunately familiar voice reaches my ears from the landing below.

"I took a whole week's wages off him, just like that." Even Anya's laugh takes on a sneering tone. "The lower staff should know better than to wager with the rest of us."

There's a muffled clink. I peek down the central spiral and make out the side of her haughty face.

A couple of her friends are standing with her. She tosses a modest leather pouch that must hold her winnings in one hand before tying the strands to her belt.

As her friends giggle about how the kitchen boy she wagered against has been taught his lesson, my teeth grit. Resolve wells up inside me, so sure and potent I can't ignore it.

Yes. That's it—that's what I need.

I ease down the stairs until I'm just out of view. Anya turns to step out into the hall, one of her friends pushing the door open for her, and I dart silently down the last flight.

As I brush past her so subtly my cloak barely rustles, a flick of a knife releases the pouch into my grasp.

As I slip on down to the ground floor, I squeeze the leather surface hard to stop the coins from jingling. The fading laughter behind me tells me that

Anya hasn't noticed the loss yet.

By the time she does, I bet I won't even be on campus.

Ivy? Julita says in a doubtful voice, but I don't let her shake my conviction. I stride past the guards patrolling the courtyard, restraining a shiver at a brief trembling of the ground, and hustle out through the gate.

I've draped myself in silks and coiled my hair and painted my face to become one of the nobles. If I'm going to make it through whatever the next day holds, I need to remember who I really am beneath all that frivolity.

I take the quickest path I can to the outer wards, dodging other pedestrians, darting down alleys. With each mile I cover, the buildings shrink and slant, until they've transformed from stone mansions to wooden hovels.

This neighborhood wasn't next on my rotation as the Hand of Kosmel, but I've lost track in my absence anyway. The massive family of fringe-dwellers I abandoned will appreciate my contribution all the same.

Normally I'd wait until dusk, but I don't need Julita's men flying into a panic again. At the first residential street I reach where the fences sag and the houses are held up with a mixture of overgrown vegetation and sheer will, I veer into the row of scruffy back gardens.

Because it's full daylight, I have to stop more often than usual to flatten myself against a refuse bin or a shed. But for the most part, the inhabitants are busy in their houses or off at work.

Halfway down the row, I pause to wait for an elderly woman to finish tending to her scruffy garden. She plucks up the last few weeds and moves her hand down her front in the gesture of divinities, maybe making a silent prayer to *Prospira* for good growth.

The motion reminds me of Alek making the same gesture—and Stavros over my bloody body yesterday, and other nobles a dozen times over the last couple of weeks.

How strange is it that they and the people here are so far apart from each other, but in at least one way, they're the same?

While I linger on the outskirts in both places.

A brief sense of melancholy drifts over me, but it fades when I get on with my task. Another window and another gets its "blessing" of silver.

There aren't all that many coins in the pouch I lifted from Anya. I'd have thought the college could afford to pay even kitchen boys more than this.

As I set down the last pile, the pouch gone light in my hand, a sweeping sense of release washes over me.

No matter what else happens, I gave back a little more. I helped *someone*. Maybe it won't count for much in the eyes of the gods, but it matters to me.

Now what? Julita mutters as I step out into the wider street. *Don't tell me we're going back to the cloth factory. You can't just leave—*

"I'm not," I say, setting off again. "I'm going back. I just needed to—"

A towering figure steps from the shadows to intercept me, and my voice dies in my throat.

Stavros sets his hands on his hips, his head cocked to the side and his mouth set at a slanted angle I can't decipher.

"So," he says in that cool drawl of his, "you're even more of a thief than I guessed."

My hackles rise automatically, but my sense of self-preservation holds me in place, my stance rigid. A slightly hysterical laugh forms at the base of my throat.

Have I gone through all this only to be arrested for petty theft?

I adjust my feet against the uneven dirt of the road in case I need to run for it. "I don't consider it quite theft when it's money essentially stolen to begin with. What are you doing here?"

Stavros keeps the same implacable expression. "I saw you hurrying across the courtyard and wondered what your urgent mission is. And I didn't suppose you were likely to tell me if I simply asked."

The gleam in his dark gaze dares me to argue. I can't.

"So you followed me all the way out here?" My skin itches with both irritation and horror. How did I not realize?

Stavros shrugs. "My father was a believer in smarts as well as might. He taught me plenty about stealth when he was there to teach. Where did you get the coins?"

My fingers tighten around the empty pouch. I don't see any point in lying about that. "Anya was bragging about how she'd won it off one of the kitchen staff."

"Hmm." His gaze lifts to the house behind me with a brief head-twitch. He must be able to just make out the glint of the silver by the back window.

To my shock, a genuine guffaw tumbles out of him.

Stavros shakes his head in apparent bemusement. "All this time—Great God help me. *All this time* I had the Hand of Kosmel sleeping on my fucking sofa."

My jaw goes slack. I snap my mouth closed again, my stomach lurching, but my initial reaction will have more than confirmed I recognize that nickname.

Stavros's gaze is back on me, studying me with another focusing twitch.

"What are you talking about?" I say, because I can't quite bring myself to give up that easily.

Stavros dismisses my attempt at denial with a careless wave of his prosthetic hand. "Do you think the stories don't get around that far? The Crown's Watch listens to gossip, and then they gossip about the more interesting stories among themselves, and I do pass the time with them now and then. I'm more curious how many of the disgruntled merchants they've had to pacify were your victims."

I draw my chin up. "I don't have anything to say about that."

"No, I suppose you wouldn't." He studies me for a few moments longer with another subtle twitch of his head. What exactly is he looking for?

I cross my arms in front of me. "I *do* take our investigations seriously, whatever you happen to think. I just—I needed to step away and remember why it matters. I was on my way back to the college."

"I know. I heard you saying so—to Julita, I assume."

"Yes."

With a beckoning gesture, he turns in the direction I was headed. "Well, come on then. If you're well enough to run around the city, you can assist me with my Siege Survival class."

Is that all? "You're not going to arrest me?"

"I wasn't planning on it, but I could drag you over to the nearest station of the Crown's Watch if that's what you'd prefer."

"No. No." I lope forward to join him, feeling abruptly awkward.

The awkwardness turns into sarcasm on my tongue. "You're not even going to lecture me about taking off on my responsibilities? Or failing to properly inform every concerned party of where I was going?"

Stavros lets out a bark of a laugh so raw it startles me. "I got the impression I did more than enough of that yesterday."

I open my mouth, close it again, and finally settle on, "I suppose you did."

We walk in silence for several minutes, leaving behind the fringes for the less shabby streets on the edge of the middle wards. Stavros rests his prosthetic hand, the realistically sculpted one he's currently got on, on his

opposite palm, running his thumb over the inflexible fingers.

“You’ve been at it for a while, this charity project. I first heard the talk about ‘the Hand of Kosmel’ a few years back.”

“Yes.” If he’s not going to ask a proper question, I don’t see the need to give more than a single-syllable answer.

“From what I heard, most of the merchants complaining about lost earnings were of the particularly slimy sort.”

In answer to that comment, I simply grunt.

Stavros glances over at me. “You would have been putting yourself at an awful lot of risk, over and over. Leagues more than if you’d only been stealing to get by on your own. Why?”

It’s the shortest question possible, but it compels me to give a proper response anyway.

“You put yourself in an awful lot of danger every time you led the army into battle against our enemies. Somehow you felt that was worthwhile.”

I don’t need to spell my motivations out more. He considers my answer for a moment and then says, “I was trained for that danger. Brought up for it. You wouldn’t have—”

“I had my own experiences to prepare me. I’m not happy about everything I’ve done in my entire life. If I can set some things right, it seems only fair.”

He hesitates. “Well, that explains rather a lot. I know your family treated you harshly. I can’t imagine anything a child could do that would warrant those scars on your back.”

Oh, he can. He just hasn’t let himself.

I grimace, but part of me wants to be a little honest, just this once. To keep being who I actually am a bit longer.

“My little sister died when I was seven,” I say. “My parents resented the fact that I was alive and she wasn’t.”

And the fact they suspected: that I’d been the one who killed her.

How can I blame them, really, when I’ll never forgive myself either?

I keep that half of the answer to myself, which is the only reason Stavros’s mouth tightens with sympathy rather than disgust. But he must sense it’s not a subject I want to dig into any further.

He drags in a breath. “The Watch raided The Night’s Calling last night. The attic showed some signs of habitation, but no one was currently living there.”

I'd be grateful for the change of subject, but my heart sinks at the news. "Another dead end."

Did Ster. Torstem secret his special ladies away to some other place? Does he know we're on to him—did *he* direct the attack on me?

"For now," Stavros says. "It does suggest that everything is connected. Torstem didn't say anything about them leaving when you were listening in, did he?"

"No. I suppose it could be a coincidence."

He snorts. "I'd rather not bet on that."

I guess I wouldn't either.

The former general picks up his pace, and I manage to match it on my shorter legs. It's only when the spires of the temple come into view up the sloping inner-ward street ahead of us that he gets back to business.

"All circumstances considered, I'd *strongly* prefer if you'd oblige me and not make any more impromptu trips around the city. Whoever made that attempt on your life is likely to try again."

I wrinkle my nose at him. "Don't you think you should be worried about yourself too? Are you keeping tabs on the other men or just me?"

"I can look after myself. And the others have barely been seen around you. There's no reason for anyone to think you've been making arrangements with them."

"Still, I—"

A chill races through my veins.

My gaze jerks to Stavros. "Have you seen Esmae since my attack?"

His brow furrows. "The dormmate of Julita's you've been friendly with? I can't say so, but I might not have noticed."

My heart starts thudding faster. "She didn't come by to check if I was okay?" I assume word about my trip to the infirmary must have gotten around the college by now.

"Not while I was with you. Why?"

I release a hiss of frustration. "I've been seen talking with *her* several times. If someone's looking for potential allies of mine, she's the first person they'd think of."

Stavros frowns. "I'm sure if anything had happened to her—"

"You don't *know*." I grasp my skirt at the sight of the college gate ahead of us, preparing to hustle forward. "I'll play assistant after I've checked on her. If my would-be murderer hasn't gotten to her too."

THIRTY-FIVE



As I lope across the courtyard to the Domi, the ground gives a little lurch beneath my feet. The walls of the Quadring creak.

One of the passing students points at the ground with a yelp. A narrow crack has split open in the soil, veering out from the base of the building.

Shit. A squad of guards tramp over, the captain hollering at everyone around to “Stay calm!” but I bolt through the doorway.

I don’t know what’s going to happen to this place. I don’t know if the college can even be saved.

But I’m not letting the one real friend I’ve made get taken down in the wreckage.

I clamber up the steps, taking some two at a time, to the second floor. As I burst out into the hall, the building gives another shudder, unnerving enough to make my pulse wobble.

A few of the other students are huddled in the hallway, murmuring to each other in anxious tones. Hustling past them, I catch a couple of truncated phrases: “unhappy daimon” and “challenging the king.”

Obviously the rumor about divine dissatisfaction is still going around. I can get back to work at proving the real source of the spirit-creatures’ distress once I’ve confirmed that my friend hasn’t been murdered.

I’m sure she’s all right, Julita says as I round the corner on the way to her old dorm room. *No one could think Esmae was some sort of vigilante champion for justice.*

“I don’t think we can assume the person who stabbed me and came back

to shove the knife in farther is incredibly logical in all things,” I mutter back.

I’ve almost reached the dorm room door when a woman I vaguely recognize from the hunt emerges. Another of Julita’s former dormmates, I guess.

“Hi!” I say with forced brightness, drawing to a stop as I reach her. “Is Esmæ in there?”

If not, maybe she has some idea what class Esmæ would have right now. She wouldn’t normally get dinner this early.

“As far as I know,” the woman says, knitting her brow. “Zofia checked on her around lunchtime when she missed a class they have together, and Esmæ said she wasn’t feeling well and was skipping the day. I assume she’s still in there.”

My spirits plummet before they’ve had much chance to rise. “You haven’t seen her?”

She shakes her head. “Not since yesterday morning. It’s not as if we’re close, though.” She reaches back toward the door. “Maybe it’d be good for her to talk with someone. I can let you in.”

Julita lets out a soft huff as I slip into the common room. *I could have gotten us in. I know that door—there are ways if you’ve lost your bracelet. Not as secure as the front gate.*

I refrain from pointing out to her that it doesn’t matter anyway. We’re inside.

As my gaze slides around the common room, I realize I don’t know which bedroom belongs to Esmæ. I never saw her come out when I was in here before.

Anya’s not around, at least. The whole common room is deserted at the moment.

I raise an eyebrow at Julita in question, and she hums noncommittally. *I never paid that much attention. You could simply call out her name—she’ll hear you.*

And so will any dormmates also in their bedrooms. I’m not sure if it’s wise to make that much of a ruckus.

I hesitate and then start forward, thinking I can at least get closer before I call out. But just as I reach the line of doors on the right side of the room, near where Esmæ was sitting that first day, the one a few paces away from me eases open.

My eyes lock with a familiar one-eyed gaze. That one eye flares wider...

and Esmæ moves to yank the door shut again.

I don't think, only react on instinct. There isn't time to snatch up one of my knives, but I fling myself forward and catch the door with the toe of my boot before it reaches the doorframe.

“Esmæ, what's the matter? I'm here to help. If someone's been after you —”

“This really isn't a good time,” Esmæ squeaks out, but I push the door wider. And then I stare.

A hasty cloth bandage has been pressed to Esmæ's chest just above the neckline of her gown, spots of dried blood showing through. The fabric droops with her abrupt jerk backward, revealing an edge of a cut—shallow slash of raw pink that's no longer actively bleeding.

My heart stops. “They attacked you too. I was worried... Who was it? Why haven't you been to the infirmary? We need to tell the guards—”

Esmæ takes another step back, her face going so tight that my words die in my throat. I follow her into the room automatically, distantly taking in the perfect order of the space—the bed neatly made, the books all lined up at exactly the same depth on the bookcase.

“Why don't you sit down?” Esmæ says in a strange voice that makes me wonder if she's injured worse than I can tell. She motions to the chair at her small desk.

I move toward it, but only to grip the top to steady myself. “We have to get you to a medic to see to that cut. And if you know who came after you, we can...”

I falter for the second time as Esmæ positions herself between me and the door. She reaches toward her bookcase and picks up something off one of the shelves.

It's just a letter opener, a thin blade with a wooden curlicue at the top. But she holds it like a dagger.

Ivy, something doesn't feel right about this, Julita murmurs, as if she's afraid of being overheard.

No, it doesn't. I swallow thickly, clutching the chair tighter. “Esmæ, what's going on?”

She smiles faintly and reaches toward her throat—to the pendant that matches the one she gave me—absently, as if she's barely aware of the movement. “I thought you were still in the infirmary. The medics took your necklace off. I should have considered that.”

I guess they did. I'd gotten the necklace so recently I hadn't thought to look for it.

But her odd comment brings to mind the tingle of magic I sensed in it.

"Can you— You can tell where it is? They're magically connected?" I eye her pendant with a deeper lurch of my gut. "Why would you want to know where I am?"

"You've been going all over the place." Esmae rotates the handle of the letter opener between her fingers, her gaze never leaving me. "You said you'd barely spoken to Julita in years, but that didn't stop you from digging and digging behind my back."

Several fragments from the past couple of weeks slide together in a sickening collision. I sink into the chair, but only so I can rest my left hand on my thigh right by the overlapping strips of fabric that hide one of my knives.

"She disappeared," I say quietly. "Even if we weren't close anymore, it's natural that I'd be worried, isn't it? Esmae, how did you get that cut?"

"I don't know," she snaps, her voice laced with venom. "But I'm guessing it has something to do with you. What's your gift, really?"

The voice last night, the one I wanted to believe I hallucinated, echoes up from my memory. *I'll aim the backlash at the one who attacked you.*

Why would Esmae hide a wound? Why wouldn't she get help?

Unless she was afraid the injury would prove something else she wanted to keep hidden.

What if I did tap into my magic yesterday... and the healing power I called on dug its claws into her to balance the scales? Just like the voice promised.

My throat has closed so tightly it takes me a few seconds to regain my voice. "I'm more interested in hearing about your gift now. How exactly do you carry messages across an entire country?"

Why did I never ask her that before? Jurnus doesn't just preside over communication and travel but weather as well.

What better way to convey a missive swiftly and directly than on the wind?

But it never occurred to me that the details of her magic would be important. She was so fucking *nice*.

Esmae lets out a dark laugh. "I don't think that really matters at this point, do you?"

I fumble for something else to say, some part of me desperately hoping that if I give her the right opening, she'll reveal this is all some horrible joke. "And knives... I suppose they could be considered a sort of message, huh?"

Esmæ shows no sign of misunderstanding my meaning. Her eye narrows, and her fingers tighten around the letter opener.

Another chilling thought hits me. "When I was drugged in the cafeteria—you started asking me about Julita. Was that a trick to get my guard down?"

She wrinkles her nose. "That isn't how I'd have done it. Once it was done, why shouldn't I have taken advantage?"

Because we were friends, I want to say. But obviously that was never true.

The question tumbles out in a weaker voice than I like. "Why?"

"I've worked too hard," Esmæ says flatly. "I gave too fucking much to let her steal my opportunities away from me, and I'm not going to let you ruin my life either."

I feel it would be unwise to point out to her that the life ruining seems to be mostly happening in the opposite direction.

What is she talking about? Julita says with obvious distress. *I barely even talked to her when I was alive. I certainly never interfered with any of her career ambitions.*

I hold up my right hand in a placating gesture. "What opportunities do you think Julita was trying to steal from you?"

Even more anger sharpens Esmæ's voice. "She was cozying up to the professor I'd want for my recommendations. He only puts forward one student in each graduating class. Her gift wasn't even in his specialty, but she had to weasel her way in there..."

I swear, Ivy, I have no idea what she's talking about. I'm not—I wasn't—even on the same track as Esmæ. I've told you before, I was studying so I can take over my family estate. She wanted to get a job with one of the courtly families. I didn't need recommendations.

I will my own voice to stay steady. "She told me she was planning on taking over as countess in Nikodi after she was done here. Why would she have been angling for a recommendation to the court?"

"She must have lied to you! I saw it with my own eyes. He told me I should keep an eye out, and then I saw her going to Ster. Lezek's quarters... laughing with him... conniving her way into his good graces like she did with everyone..."

Julita sounds even more bewildered. *Ster. Lezek? I've never even had a class with him. I went to his office one time because I got a note asking me to, but when he met with me, he was confused about it too. We had a little laugh, and then I left...*

A note. Like the one that had me following Romild but apparently went nowhere too?

A shiver runs down my spine. Oh, no. Oh, please, no.

“Esmae,” I say, soft but steady, “who’s ‘he’? Who told you that Julita was out to get in your way?”

Not Ster. Torstem. No, it would have looked strange for a professor to insert himself into student affairs.

But Torstem was never who made me look at Romild either.

It was...

“Wendos,” Esmae declares with an emphatic slash of the letter opener. “Wendos of Nikodi. He should know her, shouldn’t he? He said they grew up together, and she told him things; he didn’t think it was fair not to warn me. To point me in the right direction to do what I had to do.”

That bastard, Julita snarls. When we’re through with him—

I raise my placating hand higher. “Esmae, you need to listen to me. Wendos had his own agenda. He wanted you to hurt Julita. Did he point you toward me too?”

She scoffs. “He didn’t need to. You told me what you were about the moment you came in here looking through her things. For a little while, I thought maybe I didn’t need to worry after all, that you really didn’t care... but then it became obvious.”

There’s nothing but determined ferocity in her eye now. Wendos must have seen it in her—the insane dedication behind the quiet front, the fanatical need to ensure her future place.

He pointed her at Julita—why? Did he realize his former victim had picked up on the scourge sorcery being practiced at the school? He wanted her gone without any clear way of tracing the crime back to him?

And he distracted me by drawing my attention to Romild. She probably has nothing to do with the conspiracy.

He wanted me watching her rather than him—or whoever else he realized I was suspicious of. Or maybe it was a test to see whether I’d taken up Julita’s investigations.

It doesn’t really matter.

“I had no idea you had anything to do with her death,” I say honestly. “I thought—” I thought she really was being my friend, but that sounds far too pathetic now to say it out loud. “We can figure this out. Wendos is the real criminal here. If we go to the Crown’s Watch with what we can both tell them—”

Esmæ’s mouth tightens. “You’re just trying to save yourself any way you can. Why would Wendos want Julita hurt?”

My mind goes totally blank.

Curse it all. I’m so sick of lying.

“Because he’s trying to cover up a conspiracy of scourge sorcery,” I spit out.

Esmæ gapes at me. Then she starts to laugh in a halting, humorless way. “You really will say anything. It isn’t going to work. I’ve come too far. I swore to serve the gods with my gift, and I’m going to ensure I can do that as grandly as they deserve.”

Without warning, she springs at me.

You’re always going to be at a disadvantage when you’re sitting and someone attacks you from a higher position. Less ability to maneuver, more easily knocked down.

But for all the desperate force in Esmæ’s lunge, it’s obvious the noblewoman has never really learned to fight. Not against an opponent who’s had to scrape her way to survival on the streets of the fringes.

I yank myself to the side, rolling off the chair and across the floor to the bed. As my shoulder bumps the bedframe, I’m whipping my knife from beneath my dress.

Esmæ’s stab digs the letter opener’s blade into the chair cushion. She wrenches it out and whirls toward me.

“Yesterday should have been enough. I *heard* you dying. I made sure.”

“Take it as a sign,” I say. “It isn’t meant to happen like this. Esmæ—”

She hisses through her teeth and launches herself at me again. I jerk to the side and shove, propelling her onto the bed.

I had some vague idea that I could trap her, wrap her up in the sheets so she couldn’t lash out anymore, but she’s faster than I expected. She swings around and slams her heel into my gut before I can grasp her arms.

The letter opener rakes across my forearm. I wince and snatch at her wrist, but I’m better coordinated with my knife hand.

I unsheathed the weapon as a defensive measure. I don’t really want to

use it.

Esmae might be insane, but she was a tool rather than the instigator.

She's the only concrete proof we have that Wendos orchestrated Julita's murder and my attack. That Julita even *was* murdered.

My unwillingness to fully commit to the fight is the bigger disadvantage. Esmae slashes and strikes again. Every feral movement shows she doesn't care about how she hurts me, only that she does as much damage as possible.

Meanwhile I'm dodging this way and that, trying *not* to hurt her.

I manage to grab one of her wrists and pin it down, but I have to jerk sideways when she rams the letter opener right at my face. When I shove her against the wall, she only reels for a second before throwing herself at me again.

I have Casimir's locket in a pocket by my thigh, but there's no time to grab it. Every second I hesitate, Esmae gets in another scratch or smack.

My magic starts to squirm within my ribs, begging for notice. But either the brief bit I used it yesterday or the fact that it can tell I'm far from out of my depth keeps it from outright wrenching at me.

Esmae grasps my hair and yanks hard enough to make my scalp scream. I claw at her face with my free hand, and she spins me around.

And then my feet slip on the rug.

I tumble onto my knees, and Esmae is on me. My power flares, demanding I let it intervene.

Her hand rams down with the letter opener, straight at my throat.

In that split-second, I know I might be able to deflect her blow. I might be able to send the blade into my shoulder rather than my throat.

I also know it's only a matter of seconds before my magic digs its punishing claws into me all over again, leaving me crumpled in agony... unable to block any stabs after that.

Every future ends with me as dead as Julita in the Slaughterwell alley, except—

Despite the twisting of my gut, my fighting instincts guide my hand. I whip my arm up to stop Esmae the only way I can.

An instant before she'd have rammed her blade home, my knife plunges into her chest, straight to her heart.

Esmae lurches, her blow glancing off my skin instead of digging in.

"You," she rasps as she teeters above me. "You—"

She slumps over sideways, still sputtering breath. I grope at her chest,

afraid to move the knife, afraid not to.

“I’m sorry, I’m sorry, I didn’t want to—”

My pleas and my frantic hands can’t save her. A few more furious wordless sounds rasp from her lips with flecks of spittle. The letter opener drops from her slackening fingers.

“No!” I protest. “Esmæ, come on...”

Blood seeps in a growing stain across the bodice of her dress. Her head lolls onto her arm.

Her eyes roll up, vacant as an unmarked page.

No medic can help her now.

THIRTY-SIX



As I stare at Esmæ's body, a series of thumps resonate from somewhere behind me. It takes some time for the sound to register through the ringing of shock that's blaring in my head.

Stavros's voice calls through the dorm-room door. "Ivy? Are you still in here?"

His fist bangs against the wood again. I open my mouth, but no sound comes out.

The former general must be aware of the tricks Julita mentioned for unlocking doors, or else professors have extra access. There's a mutter and a different sort of bump, and the click of the hinges swinging.

I have a sudden image of the massive man barging through the dorm's lounge area, calling out my name, and somehow that propels me to my feet. I shove Esmæ's bedroom door open just as the first syllable leaves his lips.

"Iv—"

He freezes by one of the sofas, our gazes locking. Whatever he sees in my face, it makes his eyes flash with fury.

Stavros strides over like an ornery stallion, the muscles in his broad shoulders tensing beneath his shirt and vest. "What happened? Did— You're *bleeding*."

A bolt of panic crackles through my shocked daze. What am I doing? He's going to see—he's going to know—

I stumble backward, but he practically leaps the last few paces to grasp my hand. My pulse rattling, I hold still and tensed as he examines the thin cut Esmæ carved in my forearm.

There's no hiding it, is there? And he needs to know what we're up against.

That's more important than my life.

My lips part again, and I manage to do a little more than croak. "She—it was her. It was always her."

Stavros's expression turns even stormier. He shoulders past me into the room.

I follow with my shaking hands balled tight at my sides.

He's going to see the wound on her chest, the one she already bandaged. He's going to wonder how that happened when I claimed I never saw my attacker yesterday, let alone had a chance to fight back.

And what if he sees some sign of the riven magic he's tracked down before?

The survival instinct I apparently haven't lost completely stops me from dropping to my knees and begging for mercy. I still wobble on my feet as Stavros stares down at Esmæ's limp form.

His head twitches. "That's your knife."

Of course he'd recognize it. He doesn't seem concerned about anything else, not yet, but I guess that's understandable.

The facts. I can simply state the facts—the ones that won't get me executed.

At least not immediately.

I grip the back of the same chair I did when I was first talking to Esmæ. "I came in to make sure she was okay, and she attacked me. It was her yesterday—it was her with Julita—she has a gift for conveying messages on the wind, and she managed to twist it into carrying weapons too. I—I didn't want to kill her, but the way she came at me..."

The worst of the knotted feelings inside me surges to the fore, hitting me so hard my voice breaks. "I thought she was my friend."

"Ivy." Stavros catches my elbow. I find myself grasping his shirt sleeve as tightly as I'm clutching the chair, and not because of the tremor that resonates through the floor at that moment.

A raw laugh reverberates up my throat. "I should have known better. I don't have friends. It doesn't work."

"This isn't your fault. This isn't—" Stavros looks down at Esmæ again, his forehead furrowing. "*She's* practicing scourge sorcery?"

Through the whirl of my emotions, something hardens inside me. She

wasn't—and I have to get a grip on myself.

I have to make sure that the man who's actually responsible for this horror gets what he deserves.

My legs stiffen under me. I draw my spine straight against the turmoil inside me, the mess I don't have time to sort through right now.

“Julita was right all along. Wendos is part of the conspiracy—he manipulated Esmæ into thinking Julita was sabotaging her career chances. I think he was trying to lead me in the wrong direction too. We have to find him before he can hurt anyone else.”

Stavros blinks at me as if taken aback by my shift in demeanor. But only for a moment. He isn't a celebrated general for nothing.

“Wendos,” he mutters. “Once a prick, always a prick, apparently. All right. Let's get you out of here, call on the others, and we'll pull together a plan.”

He spares Esmæ one final glance. “The king can decide what he wants to do about her after we've dealt with the more urgent problems.”

He ushers me out of her bedroom, letting the door close and lock to hide her bloody body.

My gaze darts over my dress, catching on the flecks of blood that've marred the pale green fabric. I pull my cloak closer around me to hide them.

Stavros nods approvingly. “Good. Straight down to the archive room.”

I form a tight smile. “No time to waste.”

I hurry with him down the staircase at a similarly swift pace to my way up. As I reach for the sconce in the hall of tapestries, Stavros pulls out a silver trinket that matches Casimir's, the one that's tucked in my pocket.

We burst into the small archive room. Stavros walks straight to one of the shelves and retrieves a scroll that he unfurls on the desk.

It's a blueprint of one level of the Domi—one of the dorm-level floors, based on the layout of the rooms drawn onto it.

There's already a small mark on one of them. Stavros taps it. “That's Wendos's dorm. I'll need to call for soldiers to be sent there, but I don't know if he's likely to linger anywhere obvious when he must realize his deception is coming unraveled.”

Yes, he's probably heard about the attack on me and guessed who was behind it and why. And he'll know Esmæ failed.

Julita speaks up in a thin voice. *Even though I knew Wendos couldn't be trusted... He tricked me too. Not just with the note. Our two classmates that I*

pointed out to you during the hunt—who knows if they’ve done anything at all? He might have realized I was keeping an eye on him and purposefully gotten close with them when I was around to lead me astray.

After everything else Wendos has done, I wouldn’t be surprised.

My jaw clenches. “We need to find out who his actual associates are. And we can’t go by Julita’s observations—or maybe mine either. He was suspicious of us, so he did whatever he could to confuse the situation.”

“Who did?” Alek demands, just slipping from the conjured passage. “What’s happening?”

“Wendos,” I say darkly. I’m coming to share Julita’s automatic revulsion to the name. “He’s been involved all along.”

Alek’s eyes widen within the frame of his mask. “He really— Gods. With Julita watching him that closely, it must have taken him a lot to hide what he was up to.”

I grimace. “Seems that way.”

Benedikt hustles from the passage, nearly bumping into Alek in his haste. His stride turns jauntier as he veers around the other man and glances us over. “Another emergency. Exciting times we’re living in.”

I wrinkle my nose at him. “I’m not sure ‘exciting’ is the word I’d use.”

He pauses, his gaze lingering on me, and I’m abruptly reminded that this is the first time we’ve spoken to each other since my near-murder. Since his mocking comments in this very room.

Benedikt dips his golden head and reaches a tentative hand to brush my arm through my cloak. “It’s good to see you on your feet again, whatever the circumstances. You gave us quite a scare there.”

I can’t stop my voice from going tart. “Well, I suppose it wouldn’t have been *that* great a loss.”

He winces, and I see Alek stiffen at the edge of my vision.

Benedikt’s hand drops to his side. “We were all in a bit of a lather about the whole situation—I said things I shouldn’t have. I would vastly prefer to tackle scourge sorcerers with you at our side than without.”

“Yes,” Alek says quickly. “In case I didn’t make that clear enough earlier, I completely agree.”

Nothing like almost dying to shake a little sense into people, apparently, however much they’ll mean it when the current crisis is over. I notice Stavros hasn’t bothered to outright apologize so far, even though he laid into me the most.

I shouldn't care. I shouldn't care what any of them think of me. It hardly counts when they don't know the worst part of me anyway.

So I shove down the pang that's filled my heart with their words and keep my tone firm.

"I wouldn't be here at all if this mission didn't matter to me more than anything else I could be doing." I look from Benedikt to Alek, feeling the former general's presence looming behind me.

Any response they might have given is interrupted by Casimir's arrival. As he emerges from the wall, his face tight with worry, another shudder of the building's foundation makes my pulse hiccup.

Nothing at all is going to matter unless we fix this catastrophe fast.

I clap my hands. "All right. Here's the deal. Wendos has been jerking around a whole lot of people to cover up his involvement in the conspiracy. He arranged Julita's murder. And he's got to be up to something even worse right now—him and the others. The daimon have never been this worked up before. We have to stop them, fast."

Benedikt and Casimir take the revelation in with a flicker of shock that they don't let interfere with the discussion ahead.

"All right," Casimir says, soft but steady, and looks at Stavros. "Can you get the Crown's Watch involved at this point?"

Stavros nods. "That's my next stop. But the guards are awfully noticeable—easy to dodge. I think we'll have a better chance of tracking the prick down first."

Especially if Wendos hasn't realized who Julita and I have on our side.

I glance down at the blueprint. "So someone needs to check his dorm. Obviously the dining hall is a possibility. Benedikt, you said you've played cards with him before, didn't you? And isn't he in one of the clubs Ster. Torstem runs—the one for studying bugs?"

The corner of Benedikt's mouth kicks upward. "You've got it all figured out. I can sweep the ground floor of the Domi to check the dining hall and the recreational rooms."

"I'll go by his dorm and see if anyone there has seen him recently," Casimir says. "Although—we need to be able to signal each other if we find him. I want Ivy to hold on to my locket."

Alek motions to him. "We can stay close together. I've got his class schedule memorized. I'll take a look around the professors' quarters while you're checking his dorm, and then we can head over to the Quadring not too

far apart and see if he's arrived early for his afternoon session or gone to any of the offices for extra help."

Stavros leans his hands onto the desk. "If you spot him, you alert the rest of us and keep your distance. Just don't let him out of your sight. The Crown's Watch is equipped to actually apprehend him; we simply need to get them moving in the right direction."

His last words tug at my memory. I hesitate, frowning.

Esmæ said something about being pointed in the right direction—Wendos had suggested that was what he was doing by "warning" her about Julita. But there was also...

After the carnage at the ball. He talked to that guy from the so-called Bug Club about a creature it was difficult to fully control.

You can point them in the right direction, but you can't ensure they'll act exactly the way you'd want. I conveyed the information as clearly as I could.

What information? Who was the "they" he was talking about?

Not the Crown's Watch if he was only badgering Romild to mislead me, and not me since he couldn't know I'm hosting more than one person at the moment.

The floor shivers under me and seems to pass a chill right up through my skin.

I wet my lips. "We know Wendos was manipulating Esmæ, and maybe Julita and me too, but he was also talking about something after the ball... If the mess there was *because* of him and the other conspirators, it almost sounded like—like maybe they directed the daimon purposefully, rather than it being an accidental consequence. Is that even possible?"

The men draw up short. Benedikt barks a laugh but shuts his mouth at Stavros's stern look.

Alek's eyes darken with thought. "I've never read any account of a gift that would allow a sorcerer to control daimon. Even what some of the soldiers have been doing—that's general magic for encouraging peace in any being, not something specific to daimon."

"And it hasn't been terribly effective on them either," Benedikt remarks.

Alek nods. "They're divine spirits, under the governance of all the godlen. No one gift should be enough to command them."

My mouth forms a pained smile. "Isn't that the whole point of scourge sorcery? To try to elevate themselves to the level of gods? If they're drawing on major gifts from dedications to all the godlen..."

Stavros rubs his jaw. “I don’t know. We can’t say it *isn’t* possible, but if there aren’t any accounts of even the original scourge sorcerers managing that, it seems incredibly unlikely. He probably merely meant that their other activities provoked the daimon.”

That wasn’t how it sounded. And it isn’t as if the Great Retribution left us with the most complete records of all the brutal sorcery that prompted it.

But every second I spend arguing about it is another second we’re not tracking down Wendos and his fellow delinquents.

“Never mind,” I say. “We’ve got a plan. Unless... Julita, is there anything you’d want to add?”

The men go silent as I wait for the answer, their stances tensing just slightly. None of them has mentioned her presence in me since my outburst yesterday.

Maybe after what I told them, they don’t know how to feel about her still being here.

But this was her mission first. She deserves the chance to weigh in.

A hint of gratitude colors Julita’s voice. *I think you’ve got it covered, Ivy. I just want to see Wendos and whoever he’s working with destroyed.*

“Destroy Wendos,” I say to the others. “Sounds like a good start to me.”

Alek tips his head toward Casimir. “You and I can go through the regular archives entrance so we’re not all seen coming out together.”

As they head for the door and Benedikt opens the secret passage, Stavros sets his hand on my shoulder. “You’re coming with me, Lady Thief.”

The adjusted nickname sends a strange flutter through my chest despite my annoyance with the second half. I’ve been elevated to a lady now, have I?

I assume he’s bringing me with him to the palace to report on what I witnessed. My pulse kicks up a notch as we stride down the hallway.

Instead, he leads me up the stairs to the fourth floor and over to his quarters.

As he locks the door, my forehead furrows. “What are we doing up here? Is there something you needed to bring to the palace?”

“Not quite.” Stavros motions me in and moves to a chest under the window. Whatever he starts rummaging through, there’s a lot of clanking and thudding.

“You’ll stay here while we find Wendos,” he says without looking back at me.

My eyes just about pop out of my head. “Don’t be ridiculous. We all need

to be—”

“You’ve done enough,” he interrupts, in a tone so fierce I hesitate.

He stands up with something in his hands. “You’ve nearly been murdered twice in as many days, and I’d rather not have to worry about it happening again the second I turn around. This is the one place in the college with a door only you and I—and I suppose the dean—can unlock.”

I glower at him. “I suppose we’d better hope the dean isn’t in on the conspiracy too, then. I can help. Isn’t it more important—”

The former general crosses the room to me in a few powerful strides. “We can handle it between the four of us—and the entire Crown’s Watch, once I’ve got them. And if I’m wrong about that...”

He holds out the object he pulled from the chest. It’s a leather belt, twice as thick as the dainty feminine one I’m wearing now, with a short sword in a scabbard attached at one side.

A short sword with the royal family’s crest emblazoned on the pommel in glinting gold.

My lips part. I yank my stare from it to him.

Stavros’ gaze sears into mine. “Part of my old military equipment. That crest carries weight. Show it, and whoever’s around will listen to you if you need their assistance.”

A laugh hitches out of me. “And you’re giving it to a thief?”

“Ivy...” He pushes the sword into my arms and steps closer in the same movement. His head bows over mine, his hand rising to cup my jaw.

“You’re not just a thief,” he says. “I’d already realized that, and I shouldn’t have forgotten that. And I’ve seen how dedicated you are to the cause. You’re—you’re not like anyone I’ve ever known before. I don’t know what you have going on with Casimir or whoever else—”

I scowl. “That’s nothing you should be—”

Stavros hurtles onward before I can get out more than that. “It isn’t for me to judge anyway. What matters is... I gave up a hand to receive a gift I can’t use anymore. And now it seems another ‘hand’ has come to me.” A trace of a smile touches his lips at the reference to my outer-ward nickname. “A better one than I knew to ask for. Maybe better than I deserve.”

My throat closes up. “Stavros—”

“Just listen. I don’t want to lose you, and I’ve already been on the verge too many times. I don’t know any other way I can protect you right now. So stay here and be safe, for once in your existence. Please.”

The ‘please’ unravels something inside me I didn’t know I was holding so tight. I swallow hard against the wave of affection I instinctively tamp down.

He wouldn’t say that if he knew everything.

But the fact that he’s saying it even knowing some of me feels incredible.

I adjust the sword in my arms. “All right. I’ll stay here. As long as there’s no urgent reason I *need* to leave.”

A chuckle tumbles from Stavros’s lips. “That sounds like as much of a promise as I could have expected.”

Something shifts in his expression. A flush creeps up my neck with the impression that he’s going to kiss me.

The moment crackles between us and vanishes when Stavros pulls back. He dips his head to me. “We’ll get the whole scourge on this college rounded up as quickly as we can.”

Then he strides out of the room, leaving me clutching a general’s royal sword and drowning in a whirl of emotion.

I take a couple of steps back and all but collapse onto the sofa.

“What was *that*?” I ask the air—and, inadvertently, the ghost inside me.

Julita lets out a laugh, but there’s a twinge of melancholy to her voice. *You’ve really affected him. I’ve never heard him speak like that.*

Not around her... or to her, I suppose.

My stomach twists. “I wasn’t looking for anything like that when I came here. I never meant—”

I know. You’ve got nothing to justify anyway. Even if I was still properly here, none of them were mine, at least no farther than I was using them. I got what I needed.

Maybe that’s a story she tells herself too, to lessen the sting of what she’s lost. “You cared about them more than that.”

I liked them well enough, and they liked me. But there wasn’t much to it. It appears that in a couple of weeks, you’ve given them something I didn’t bother to in the months we were working together. I think they’ve all told you things they never told me.

I don’t know how much she’s mourning the life she lost in general or the chances she didn’t take, but her attempt at a breezy tone can’t hide the sorrow.

“Once we take down Wendos and Ster. Torstem and whoever else, I’ll be done here,” I remind her. “I won’t have them either.”

She tuts. *I passed up whatever chance I might have had. Why should you?*

I doubt any of them is going to kick you out the door. Whether you're aiming for one in particular or a whole set like another Signy.

I make a dismissive sound, hoping she can't feel the flicker of exhilaration that passed through me at the thought of having all four of the men standing by me in all sorts of ways.

She doesn't know the most vital thing about me any more than they do. It's a lot more complicated than simply reaching for what I want.

And who knows how any of them will look at me once the danger has passed, regardless.

I lean forward on the sofa, opening my mouth to say as much, and a tremor quakes through the room hard enough to rattle my bones.

THIRTY-SEVEN



The books on the shelves jitter. A quill topples off the edge of Stavros's desk.

An unearthly groan reverberates through the walls.

With a lurch of my heart, I spring off the sofa. As I dash to the window, the view outside already looks wrong.

The second I reach the glass, I understand why.

One of the Quadring's four towers is collapsing.

A flood of dislodged stone and crumbling mortar tumbles to the ground in an earth-shaking thunder. The floor heaves beneath my feet, leaving me clutching the edge of the window.

Shouts carry across the courtyard, loud enough to penetrate the glass but too muddled to be all that coherent. I back away, a cold sweat breaking over my back.

The floor gives another shudder.

This doesn't seem good, Julita says in a taut voice.

I snatch up the sword from where I dropped it and lash the belt around my waist. "It doesn't. Stavros will have to forgive me for leaving when it looks like the ceiling's about to fall on our heads."

When I shove out into the hall, a few professors are already bustling toward the stairwell ahead of me.

"We've got to evacuate now," one of them is saying. "The spirits have gone absolutely insane."

Another nods. "Check the dorms. Get all the students out into the courtyard. The dean's disabling the locking system on the second and third

floors so no one gets locked in their bedroom injured and beyond reach.”

Her statement sinks in through the hammering of my pulse. The dorm room locks will be disabled?

That means I could get right into Wendos’s room. Look through his private things.

None of the men have set off the alert in the locket. They haven’t found him yet.

And who knows how much worse this disaster will get if we don’t figure out what Julita’s old nemesis and the other scourge sorcerers are up to soon?

I dash after the professors, racing on down the stairs after they veer off to tackle the third-floor dorms.

I saw Wendos leaving his dorm room before, after I visited Julita’s during my first trip to the college. In the back of my mind, I bring up the mental picture that matches the marked blueprint Stavros showed me.

On the second floor, students are crowding the hallway—some pushing past me into the stairwell or hurrying toward the other flights of stairs, some milling about in confusion. I weave through them as deftly as I can, grateful that my destination isn’t too far along.

A skinny, harried-looking guy is just emerging from the dorm, stumbling when the floor abruptly shakes. I catch his arm to help him keep his balance, and he shoots a tight but grateful smile at me. “Thank you. It’s madness around here.”

I give a half-hearted chuckle of agreement and raise my chin toward the room he was coming out of. “You’re one of Wendos’s dormmates. Is he still in there?”

The guy makes a face. “He headed out a little while ago, like he had somewhere important to be—lucky for him. Tossed off a remark that he was going to high places, whatever that was supposed to mean.”

High places. The ballroom? Was he up in the tower that just collapsed?

We should be so fortunate.

“You’d better get out of here too,” I suggest, and the guy doesn’t hesitate to brush past me, doing just that. He never glances back, so he doesn’t see me slip past the door into the common room he just vacated.

It is vacant—he must have been the last to leave. The bedroom doors are all closed or slightly ajar, but no sounds of movement reach me from any of them.

Are you sure about this? Julita asks as I dart to the nearest bedroom. *If the*

ceiling does collapse...

“This is our best chance of making sure the disaster doesn’t get to that point,” I murmur, and yank open the first door.

My conviction is rattled by a more emphatic hitch of the floor—and the sight of a crack opening in the plaster of the far wall. Gritting my teeth, I peer into the room.

Heaps of discarded clothes, a tipped over goblet on a stained rug, rumpled bedcovers—obviously someone used to household servants picking up after him.

“See anything that looks like it’s Wendos’s?” I ask Julita.

No. This wouldn’t be him. He was always careful with his things.

“Good, that’ll help narrow it down.”

The next two rooms aren’t quite as messy but still nothing close to “careful.” The fourth looks tidy, but Julita points out the godlen sigil marked on a wall-hanging over the desk. *This must be a Creaden dedicat. Wendos went with Prospira. Her tone turns acidic. He wanted his own abundance of sorts.*

The floorboards rock with my steps as I sprint to the next doorway. A distant rumble suggests more stones have fallen.

I throw open the door with an unsteady hand—and see a neatly tucked bed, closed wardrobe, and shelves organized into books, scrolls, and various wooden contraptions. But what convinces me is the glass tank at the back of the desk where a couple of bright orange beetles are crawling across strips of mossy bark.

I stride into the room. “He really does like bugs, huh?”

Julita makes a disgusted sound. *Either that or it’s just to keep up the front. But I wouldn’t be surprised, given how low he stoops.*

I jerk open the drawers on the desk and quickly uncover definitive proof of whose bedroom this is: a set of papers—a report Wendos has been working on in a cramped scrawl—with his name already written at the top.

I dig further, displacing quills and stoppered inkpots, sheafs of paper and spare candles. “This all looks like schoolwork.”

It does seem unlikely he’d have left any obvious evidence of his magical experiments lying around, even in his private chamber.

“We just need some kind of hint, anything... What are they doing to rile up the daimon now? Where are they working their magic? No one can be perfectly careful.”

I crouch down to sweep my hand under his bed, but Wendos keeps the floor not only clear but regularly swept. I don't even reach a dust bunny.

Lifting up the mattress reveals a few sketches of naked women sprawled in provocative positions, but nothing I can't imagine half the other male students—and some of the women too—have secreted away.

Maybe the books? Julita suggests.

Through another tremor, I turn toward the bookcase. Heedless of the mess I'm making, I yank text after text off the shelves. I shake their pages over the floor to check for anything stuck inside and then toss them away.

An ominous creaking sound resonates through the walls. Julita squirms in the back of my skull. *Ivy, we're not getting anywhere. The whole school could fall apart.*

"No. I'm not leaving yet. Not until I've tried everything. You obsessed over Wendos for months even when the men started to doubt you, and you were right. So let's see this fucking through."

I grate the last few words through my teeth as I throw the last book aside. Popping the seals on the scrolls, I discover nothing but faded ink.

The contraptions on the lower shelves look like they might be something to do with the bugs—to examine the creatures and test them.

Where else would he hide something? Someplace he wouldn't think anyone would look if they happened to come into his room.

My gaze slides back toward the tank with the beetles. Or someplace most people wouldn't want to disturb?

Gingerly, I set my hands on either side of the tank and lift it. At first glance, my spirits sink—the desk is bare beneath it.

But then I bother to hold the tank up higher and check underneath.

There's a folded paper with its corner wedged in the seam along the edge.

My breath catches in my throat. I snatch the paper out, set the tank down, and unfold my discovery on the desk.

It's... a bunch of circles. Three in a lopsided triangle here, three in a differently lopsided triangle there. Five different configurations, spaced far apart on the thin paper with sketchy lines, as if Wendos were simply doodling different patterns.

But why would he hide a doodle of a trios of circles?

"Does this mean anything to you?" I ask Julita.

I've never seen anything like that. I mean, just like that. It could symbolize three towers or spires or windows or whatever. A lot of buildings

have those.

Yes, because we like to do things by threes in recognition of the godlen. Three overall domains they belong to, three of them in each. But that hardly narrows anything down.

Peering closer, I notice what might be a smudge on the underside of the paper. I flip it toward me and hold it up to the late afternoon sunlight streaking through the window.

There are several smudges—faint imprints of ink as if this paper was pressed into another one it was resting on top of.

The imprints are too vague to identify any definite shapes or writing... but something about the overall pattern strikes a chord of familiarity in me. Darker clumps and touched spaces winding in between...

Like a map. Like a city map, with winding streets and clumps of buildings.

Why was Wendos marking circles on top of a map—and why in clusters of three?

“He said he was going to high places,” I murmur.

An image flashes through my mind—the old woman I saw in town earlier today, tapping three fingers against her chest in the row of three to honor the divinities.

And Alek’s comment about the daimon. *They’re under the governance of all the godlen.*

If you wanted to control the wild spirits, you’d need to call on all the gods. And if you wanted to control them on a larger scale than ever before...

Maybe you’d want to get as far from mortal activity as possible. In three different spots, to echo the divine pattern on as large a scale as possible.

What are the highest places in the city?

My mouth has gone dry. I shove the paper into my pocket and run out of the dorm, Stavros’s short sword bumping against my thigh.

Ivy, where are you going now?

“I need a better vantage point.”

I scramble up the stairs to the fifth floor that holds the dome. The hall that surrounds the ballroom is lined with windows.

I walk from one to the next, trying to clear my head of any sensation. Focusing my gaze on the tallest buildings I can see beyond the square.

Coming around the corner, I find myself facing the Temple of the Crown. And in that mere glance, a jitter of wafting magic tickles into the broken

space inside of me.

I draw my gaze up the central spire, the tallest one right in the center of the building. The jitter expands the higher I draw my gaze.

A clammy sensation wraps around my gut. Shit.

Someone's up there. And I'd bet my riven soul that whatever they're doing, they shouldn't be.

I hesitate. I could go back to Stavros's room or out into the courtyard and summon the others there. Try to convince them of what I've pieced together.

But I don't know how long that'll take. Stavros might not even have started talking to the king yet. Who knows where the other three are at this point?

My mind slips back to the moment we stood around the desk in the archive room, all of them listening to me, jumping to respond without question or argument.

I have no idea where I'll stand with them once this is over or whether I should even let myself care. But I trust them to have my back in this.

I'll go, they'll follow, and we'll tackle the threat together.

Without wasting another second, I sprint to the stairs.

THIRTY-EIGHT



No one's left in the stairwells. I make it out of the Domi unimpeded. All the way across the inner courtyard and through the Quadring's central hall, I keep my cloak tucked tightly around me to conceal both Esmæ's blood and Stavros's royal sword.

Then I burst from that entranceway with only a hundred paces between me and the main gate and find Anya standing directly in my way.

In that first instant, she has her back to me. But as I move to dodge, one girl in the pack of friends that's grown since I saw her earlier today notices me and raises her eyebrows.

Anya whirls around with a swish of her ample skirts.

At the sight of me, she makes a disdainful scoffing sound. "Where are you scurrying to so fast, country girl? You have the warrior skills to earn a spot working for General Stavros, but you run for the hills at the first sign of trouble?"

I bite my tongue against reminding her that the current catastrophe is more like the thousandth sign. "I have something to do in the city. Pardon me."

I move to veer around her, but Anya sidesteps gracefully, beckoning her friends. The clot of them closes in a semi-circle around me.

Heads all around the courtyard have turned our way. The back of my neck prickles with the awareness of their gazes.

They're all watching, evaluating how this confrontation goes down. And Anya is as aware of our spectators as I am.

Her lips curl in a sneer. "Oh, no. I think you'd better stay right here."

You'll make an excellent shield if we happen to need one."

I glare back at her. What I'd like more than anything is to whip my favorite knife out of my boot and hold it to this wretched woman's throat. But a deeper instinct holds my aggressive urges in check.

I don't know how the next few hours will go down. I might have to come back here, might have to face all these blasted nobles again, move among them, learn more secrets.

If I threaten her with violence, I'll look like an outright criminal. I can only imagine the murmurs that would spread from all the witnesses around us.

I could draw back my cloak and flash the royal crest on Stavros's sword, but what kind of rumors would *that* display provoke? I'd be shining a spotlight on just how closely he's working with me, pinning a target to his back.

I'm not sure Anya would believe the crest enough to respect it in my possession anyway.

My hands clench. I'm so tired of this harassment.

So tired of knowing that she and the rest of them would treat me ten times worse if they knew how lowly in status I actually am.

Take her down, Julita urges. Toss her right on her ass and show her who she's messing with.

I give my head the slightest shake. I don't for one second think there's anything I could do to Anya that would frighten her into leaving me alone without setting tongues wagging all across the college.

Not anything forceful, at least...

A glimmer of an idea lights in my head. Esmee nearly had me at her mercy without a single cutting word or blade.

Without letting myself second-guess the inspiration, I let out a light laugh and step toward my harasser.

"Oh, Anya, let's stop jerking our poor schoolmates around. They've got plenty of other things to worry about beyond us pretending we're at each other's throats. It's been a lot of fun while it lasted, but I think the charade has run its course. You've been fantastic at it, friend."

Anya stares at me as if I actually did stab her. Probably she'd have had a better idea how to respond in that circumstance.

Ignoring the revulsion twisting through my body, I grasp her arm and pull her into a friendly hug. With a bob on my toes, I bring my mouth close to her

ear.

“Play along and make nice,” I murmur so only she can hear, “or I’ll let Ster. Stavros drag you in front of the royal family as a traitor like he’s been itching to ever since you poisoned me. Even assistant teaching staff are delegates of the crown, you know.”

Anya’s posture stiffens. Then she lets out a chuckle that’s only slightly strained and brings her arms up to return the embrace.

Ah. So I gambled right, and she was the one who tampered with my dinner that night.

I can feel that she’s hating every second of the clinch, but that’s all right. So am I.

I draw back from her with a triumphant smile.

“I really do have an errand to take care of, but we’ll have to catch up properly soon. Take care of yourself!”

“You too,” Anya says in a dazed tone. She eases to the side, and I stride on to the gate with nothing following me but several dozen startled gazes.

By the time I reach the wall, the students behind me have already fallen back into their previous buzz of conversation. There’ll be a bit of talk about the con Anya and I supposedly pulled, pretending to be strangers and enemies, but people who like each other is not that interesting. The mutterings should fade soon.

Julita makes a noise of disbelief. *I think that ploy actually worked. But you had to hug her.*

“We all make sacrifices for the greater good,” I mutter under my breath as I slip beneath the archway.

I skirt the side of the Temple of the Crown where it stands just ahead of the college walls, through the thrum of its ever-present magic. The sensation is even more unnerving than usual now, while the knowledge of what I’m about to do simmers inside me.

I come around the front of the temple and gaze up the short flight of broad marble steps to the grand public doorway that’s open as always to worshippers. A few are ambling out right now, their expressions soft with peace in the fading daylight.

A lump rises in my throat. My heart is already thumping hard against my ribs.

Peace is the last sensation I’m going to feel stepping into that building.

I fled to the streets the morning of my twelfth birthday specifically so my

parents wouldn't fulfill their obligation to bring me to my dedication ceremony.

Going into Inganne's temple was bad enough. The structure before me is the most exalted place of worship in the country, blessed by all nine godlen and perhaps the All-Giver as well.

Will the divinities see me the second I step through that doorway? See me all the way down to my broken soul?

My hand comes to rest on the folds of my skirt. I pull out the locket, flip it open, and press my thumb to the inner surface.

A tingle of magic tells me it's worked. The men will know I've found something—they'll follow the call here.

I could simply wait outside and let them do the rest. Stavros—and maybe the others too—might even prefer that.

But as I stare up at the sublime building with dread pooling in my gut, a tremor shakes the ground all the way to the cobblestones I'm standing on.

One of the nobles who just exited the temple startles with a little gasp. My chest constricts.

The trouble is spreading. Whatever the scourge sorcerers are doing, their influence is creeping far beyond the college walls.

How much more might be destroyed if I just stand here when I could have tried to stop them?

You don't have to do anything else, Ivy, Julita says, although she can't possibly know the full reasons for my hesitation. No one would blame you.

I exhale in a rush. "I would."

Girding myself, I raise my chin and march up the steps into the temple.

Some part of me expects a lightning bolt to careen out of the sky and strike me dead before I cross the threshold. But of course that's not how the riven usually die.

The gods rely on mortals to carry out the actual executions. Out there where I was just standing, with a rope coiled tight around a neck.

I swallow thickly and propel myself across the polished marble floor. The thrum of divine power deepens, crawling through my veins.

I pass magically lit sconces and carved scenes of the godlen emerging from the sea, sky, and earth. Then I step from the entry hall into the vast worship room.

The rasp of my boots echoes off the ceiling arcing above my head, as high as the dome over the college's ballroom. Lingering rays of sunlight

streak in through divine scenes captured in stained glass across its surface.

The multicolored glow beams down over the nine sculptures arranged in their alcoves around the room, each decorated with symbols of their strengths, both artful and real.

Elox, the peaceful healer, bows his head of wispy curls over a sleeping lamb cast in marble. Someone has laid a spread of cut willow branches and lavender around his stone feet.

Sabrelle, the domineering warrior, stares fiercely from beneath her helm as she brandishes a spear. A carved hunting hound stands by her side amid a scattering of dried bloodfruit, a favored snack of soldiers.

My gaze snags on Kosmel next. The godlen of chance and trickery peers across the room with a sly smile curving his thin lips, a crow perched on one shoulder and a rat nestled against his opposite forearm. Dice lie around his booted feet.

I've heard that people weighing the risks of a particular decision will roll one under his watch and take guidance from the numbers turning up odd or even.

I have the urge to walk up to him and study him more closely, as if I'll find answers in a devout's stone rendition. With an itch of discomfort, the memory rises up of the unsettling voice that came to me while I lay dying.

If any of the godlen would not just look the other way but outright encourage my monstrous magic, it'd be the guider of gamblers and protector of rascals, wouldn't it?

Or maybe that voice had nothing to do with the gods. Maybe I did imagine it, and I aimed the backlash of my magic at Esmae myself.

Maybe it was the gift of some mortal figure I hadn't realized was watching over me.

I'm not sure any of those options are exactly *good*.

I yank my eyes away and hurry to the thick column in the center of the room. It contains a spiral staircase that winds all the way up into the central spire, the tower of the All-Giver.

At least I don't have to worry about the Great God glaring down on me, since the One who is all things was offended enough by the first batch of scourge sorcerers to abandon our continent centuries ago in the midst of the Great Retribution.

Having now experienced the venom of scourge sorcery firsthand, I kind of understand.

I climb the stairs as quickly as my legs will go. With every step, the taint of magic in the air thickens.

It's not only the temple's, but an energy that's more erratic and searing as well, radiating down from above.

To my frustration, my own power stirs in my chest in answer. It starts to niggle at my innards with its familiar demands.

I could launch myself right to the top of the tower in an instant. I could crush whoever's working their brutal sorcery up there without even seeing them.

I set my jaw and march on up. I *need* to see.

I need to know what's actually happening before I can be sure of stopping it properly.

And I won't lower myself to the same stinking depths Wendos and his allies have, not caring what or who they sacrifice to get what they want.

When I reach the first windows showing the increasingly dim light of the impending evening outside, I know I've emerged beyond the level of the temple's main roof. I push my burning calves onward, breathing in a slow, steady rhythm.

There are platforms at periodic intervals now. The flat spans of stone floor hold markings of ash, wax, and other fragments that suggest the clerics conduct occasional rituals up here.

I haven't passed so much as a devout. Do they not use the All-Giver's tower regularly?

Or have the scourge sorcerers done something to ensure the temple's staff would be occupied elsewhere?

A breeze drifts down from above, carrying an acrid smell. Julita's presence goes rigid at the back of my head.

That's burnt dartling eggshell. Borys and Wendos thought it would help them consolidate sacrifices into a greater power.

At the same moment, I catch the first muffled voice from above. Whoever's burning the stuff now, I've almost reached them.

I set my feet even more carefully as I continue my swift ascent, keeping my ears pricked. When I get close enough for the words to become clear, I recognize the voice of the man who approached me in the library and claimed to be Julita's friend.

Wendos's tone is harsher now. "We need more. I can't quite connect our power with the others'. Focus your gifts."

A youthful female voice answers, lower and pained. “We’re trying.”
“We’ll see through our duty to the gods,” another man says with a rasp.
“We won’t let them down.”

They think they’re doing this *for* the gods? Are they insane?

I guess that’s a very real possibility.

I ease up the last spiraled flight with silent steps and breath held. Who are the “others” Wendos mentioned that he’s trying to connect his magic with?

My hand drops to the pocket where I tucked his sketch paper. The arrangements of three circles.

Was I right, and at least two more scourge sorcerers are at some other high points in the city? It sounds like they haven’t accomplished what they’re aiming for yet, though.

So what exactly is that? The college is already in chaos.

But they’re out here in the rest of Florian. Maybe they’re hoping to wreak the same havoc across the entire capital.

My blood runs cold. I push myself a little faster—until the final landing emerges into view around the next curve of the staircase.

I spot the top of Wendos’s head, his shaggy dark hair swaying as he shifts his view. His back is mostly to me.

Crouching low, I creep up step after step. Then I huddle with my back against the central post of the spiraling stairs, which ends at the span of floor just above my head.

At the sight before me, my stomach flips over.

Yes, Wendos is standing there, poised by the stone railing that surrounds the uppermost platform of the tower. Only the nine narrow columns that hold up the final spire of the roof break the view of the rest of the city all around us.

Julita’s childhood tormenter has smeared a dark, glinting powder across his hands and the stone edge, and he mutters words I can’t make out as he stares off into the distance.

Toward his far-off associates?

He has other associates here, though. Three of them, hunched in a ring around him—but they barely look like people at all.

Their scalps are bare patchworks of scarring where their hair was carved off. Only ruddy holes mark where their ears should be. The one I can see in profile has nothing but wizened hollows where his eyes once were.

And their bodies...

Their cloaks slump across shoulders far too narrow. I don't think any of them have *arms*. A wooden post protruding from one figure's skirt suggests she's lost a leg as well.

No, not lost. Sacrificed.

Gods save us all, Julita murmurs.

As nausea roils through my stomach, I understand. The scourge sorcerers haven't lured innocent kids into sacrificing their whole existence to fuel someone else's power—at least, not all of their victims. They've had them give up every piece of themselves they can while still living to gain who knows what twisted gifts the godlen felt obliged to reward them with in return.

In a sickening way, the strategy makes sense. It's a subtler approach than the typical, fatal scourge sorcery technique.

The sacrificial accomplices have kept their own gifts while staying ready to support their sorcerous leaders with them when called on. No one figure has been carrying massive amounts of power as if trying to match the divine.

Alek said it'd take the power of all the godlen to compel daimon. Are there at least nine of these ruined figures positioned around the city for the sorcerers' evil purpose?

Where did they come from? Is this who Ster. Torstem had hidden away in the brothel's attic?

Were they the prostitutes' children? How could anyone in that place allow this horror to happen to kids they'd watched grow up?

Wendos hisses through his teeth and makes a sharp motion at the forms around him. "Concentrate harder! We need the daimon rampaging right through the inner wards if we want everyone to see the truth."

My pulse hiccups. They have found a way to control the spirit-creatures, then.

But what truth could he possibly think he's conveying?

His voice has gone even more ragged. Whatever his mad purpose is, he's obviously happy to tear the city apart for it.

I glance at the stairs behind me, but there's no sight or sound of *my* associates. How long will it take for Julita's men to follow me?

I dig my hand into my pocket to press the locket again, in case they won't realize I've gone up the tower. I have no idea how long the magical signal lasts.

Wendos has to be stopped—but we need to know who he's working with

too. Where the other sorcerers are. What they're trying to accomplish.

Ending this catastrophe isn't as simple as running in there and stabbing the royal sword straight through him. I don't know how to do this right.

Then the woman in the middle of the semi-circle stifles a sob, and Wendos's attention jerks toward her.

"Get yourself together, Fyrinth," he snarls. "Or would you rather Torstem dumped you back at the whorehouse where maybe you belong after all?"

Fyrinth?

I register the confirmation of my suspicions, of Torstem's involvement and the brothel's, but all that feels momentarily distant behind the chill that name provokes.

It's not a common one in this city—I think it's Icarian or Bryfesh in origin rather than Silanian. But I've heard it before, just a few days ago.

What are the chances that one of the orphans Torstem saw off to the Inganne's temple had the exact same name?

Oh, Julita mumbles, just as the same realization hits me like a sucker punch. *Oh, no. He switched them.*

The women of the brothel didn't sacrifice their own children. They sent them off to better lives at the temples.

Did they even know it'd be under some other child's name?

The girl who was going by Fyrinth—her sacrificed little finger—just like one of the prostitutes I spoke with. It's a common minor sacrifice. I never would have assumed...

That could have been her mother. And the real Fyrinth was secreted into their attic, with no one at the orphanage or the temple having a clue that she'd never ended up at her supposed destination.

No wonder the devouts spoke so vaguely—or outright fancifully—about their visits to the college. *They* had never actually been, only the kids whose places they'd taken.

How far does the conspiracy stretch? There are dozens of brothels across Florian's wards.

We have no idea how many devastated children the sorcerers have groomed and hidden throughout the city. How much power they might be calling on now.

Fyrinth sucks in a ragged breath and squares what's left of her shoulders.

Whatever she does must help, because Wendos's face brightens. "That's it. I can feel that. It just might be enough..."

As he turns back toward the view of the city, my gut churns. There's still no sign of my allies arriving.

It's only me. I have to stop him before he unleashes even more terror on my city, however I possibly can.

My magic shudders in my chest alongside the queasiness in my gut, but there's no direct threat to me yet. It isn't wrenching at me the way it can.

Let's hope I can keep it that way.

I slide Stavros's sword from its sheath, testing the weight in my hands. It's about twice the size of my favorite knife and three times the weight, but I've wielded bulkier weapons when I've needed to.

Maybe the interruption will shake the accomplices' loyalty to the man who's channeling their gifts. Maybe I can take him prisoner without any more bloodshed.

I have to try.

I heft the sword in my hands and adjust my position on the steps. Inhale and exhale to steady my body and my mind. Wait until Wendos appears completely focused on the world beyond the tower.

And then I launch myself at him.

THIRTY-NINE



I fling myself up the last few steps and over the smooth stone tiles of the tower's highest platform.

There's little room to maneuver. I'm going with the best strategy the environment allows: barrel straight into my target and knock him down.

If I can pin him to the floor with the sword at his throat, I don't think there's much his ravaged accomplices can do. And once Stavros gets here, possibly with the king's soldiers in tow, he can take Wendos into custody.

That's the idea, anyway. I didn't take into account the scourge sorcerers' *other* accomplices, unwilling or not.

I hurtle across the floor, the blade flashing. Wendos starts to whirl at the thump of my feet, too slow.

Just as I'm about to dart between two of the slouched figures to reach him, an invisible force smacks into me from the side with a crackle of supernatural power.

He must have commanded at least one daimon to play guard.

I stumble to the side. As I regain my balance and whip back toward him, Wendos's eyes widen.

He snaps out a sharp, nasal-toned phrase of words I don't recognize, and all at once I'm battered by a supernatural onslaught.

Blows pummel me from chest to calves as if a heap of invisible fists are slamming into me all at once. I hiss in pain and stagger backward, and something flits past my ankles, knocking my feet out from under me.

Right at the top of the stairs.

I skid down several steps as I grope to catch my fall. My tailbone jars

against the stone edges, pain spiking up my spine.

The royal sword goes spinning out of my grasp, clattering farther down the stairwell.

Just as I manage to snag my fingertips on a small groove in the wall, Wendos sweeps his hand downward as if in command. I don't know what specifically he was hoping his harnessed daimon would do, but the stairs above me shake and crack.

Chunks of stone surge toward me, some bashing into my body, others tumbling past me after my sword or raining down through the widening crack onto the stairs below. One particularly large piece crashes down on my shin.

I can't hold back the cry of pain at the agony that lances through my leg. It feels like the blasted chunk of marble shattered the bone.

A pit has opened up in the stairwell between me and the platform where Wendos is standing—six steps fallen away, leaving nothing but empty air unless I want to plummet a story down onto the rubble beneath.

My magic surges through me, battering me from the inside out in turn for a chance to fight back. I clamp down on it with the clenching of my jaw.

My power scratches at my innards with its usual frustration, but not nearly as overwhelmingly as the last several times. As if the fact that I let it out yesterday has partly appeased it.

I don't know whether to rejoice or cringe away from that fact.

I wrench myself into a proper sitting position, pushing close to the wall and gasping for breath. I could have jumped that distance, even going upward, at my best.

But not with a broken leg.

We can still do this, Ivy, Julita says, but there's a wobble in her voice. *I know you can find a way.*

Wendos saunters up to the crumbled edge of the platform to gaze down at me. There's no hint left in his tense face of the supposedly concerned guy who implored me to turn to him if I needed help.

As he takes me in, his eyebrows rise. He makes a scoffing sound. "You. How the hell did *you* find me?"

I scowl at him. "You aren't half as smart as you'd obviously like to believe you are."

Wendos lets out a low chuckle. "And yet somehow no one other than me realized Julita had noticed our activities. I took care of her before our past association became a liability with my colleagues, and I'll take care of you

too. The others will never even have to know.”

Oh, he thinks so, does he? Julita sneers.

A shiver wriggles down my spine. I bite my tongue against the urge to throw Wendos’s bragging remarks back at him, to tell him he never managed to get rid of Julita entirely.

The less he thinks I know, the more chance there is that he’ll give me an opening.

I still have two knives—one at my right hip and one in my left boot. But I can’t risk reaching for them while he’s looking straight at me.

The pain in my shin throbs on. Unwanted tears sting behind my eyes.

“What’s happened?” one of the armless figures mumbles, turning her sightless face. “Are we—”

Wendos doesn’t even look back at her as he snaps out his answer. “I’ve got it under control. Go back to focusing on your gift.”

I lever my body carefully so that my legs are parallel with me on the same step, giving me a more stable position. “The gifts aren’t really *theirs* when you and your ‘colleagues’ convinced them to make their sacrifices for your purpose, are they?”

I pitch my voice so the slouched figures can hear me too. If I can make them rethink helping him...

I can’t see them from here, but none of them says another word.

Wendos gives no indication of concern. “It’s their purpose too. It’ll be better for all of us. Even you, no matter what Julita told you before she died. Who are you really?”

I edge my hand a little closer to my hip. “A friend. Unlike you.”

“As you apparently knew from the start.” He bears his teeth in an unnerving grin. “That’s fine. We’ll figure it out.”

His gaze sweeps over me, lingering on the blood streaking through my underskirt from my broken shin and how gingerly I’ve angled my leg. “I don’t think you’re walking down all those stairs, so you can stay right there until I’ve finished the important part. Then I’ll deal with you.”

He starts to turn away.

My heart lurches. I can’t just stand here and watch while he compels a horde of daimon to ravage all of Florian.

The men can’t be *that* far behind me, can they? With the Crown’s Watch at their heels?

Simply delaying him might be all I need.

I blurt out the first thing that pops into my head, desperate to interrupt his work. “How is destroying the city good for anyone?”

Wendos lets out another chilling laugh. “Sometimes you have to knock a few things down in order to build something better. Even the All-Giver knew that. The Order of the Wild will put things right.”

He brushes his hand down his front in a three-fingered tap... as if he thinks the divinities would *approve* of this madness. I barely stop my jaw from dropping.

Julita’s voice has turned faint. *He’s gone even more insane than he was before.*

“The Order of the Wild?” I ask, but Wendos ignores me, walking away. I can’t even see the tufts of his stupid shaggy hair from my current position.

“Let’s continue,” he says to his accomplices, and picks up his previous muttered chant. I can make out the syllables now, but they’re no words I know.

The waft of magic they stir raises the hairs on my arms.

As I force my breaths to even out, mastering the pain in my leg, Julita’s presence stirs.

You are, you know, she says quietly.

I arch an eyebrow in a question Wendos can’t hear.

A friend. You’re the best friend I’ve ever had. However this ends... Thank you.

Tears that have nothing to do with my fractured shin form behind my eyes. I didn’t ask for this mission, and there are plenty of things I’ve criticized Julita for, but she didn’t have to say that. She must know by now there’s no need to say anything to get me to keep fighting.

She simply wanted me to know.

I dip my head in silent acknowledgment. Then I lean forward to reach for the sheath in my boot.

If I’m only going to get one chance, I want my favorite knife.

The blade slides out easily, my fingers curling around the familiar hilt. But I can hardly hit Wendos with it when he’s out of sight.

He’s underestimated me in his arrogance. I have to take full advantage of that fact, whatever way I can.

The daimon on guard only intervened when I got close to Wendos. He indicated in the conversation I overheard after the ball that he can’t direct them too specifically.

It's possible that a thrown knife could get past them. I just need to be in a position to actually throw it.

As I shift my legs, I grit my teeth until my jaw is aching nearly as much as my shin. My power twitches inside me, reminding me that I could heal my leg if I wanted to.

But at what cost?

If I could be sure it'd be Wendos's bones broken in my place, that'd be one thing. For all I know, the backlash will hit some innocent person.

Or one of the men hopefully climbing the stairs beneath me, sending them toppling to a snapped neck.

How much good would it do me to fix my leg anyway? I already know that throwing my whole body at this asshole isn't the answer.

With the threat to my life no longer immediate, I can tune out the nagging of my magic, if only some of the physical pain I'm in. I can't put any weight on my one foot, so I angle myself around until I'm squatting on my knees.

My cloak seems likely to trip me up in my current position. It isn't as if I need to hide my dress here.

I untie it and let it slip from my shoulders onto the lower stairs. Then, with my hand braced against the wall and tears I can't blink back welling in my eyes, I lurch up one step.

Then another.

Then another.

Each impact radiates a sharper agony through my leg from foot to hip. The pain crackles through my thoughts, dizzying me. I bite my lip to hold back a whimper.

Without consciously intending to, I find myself picturing Casimir. The affection in his voice when he told me he wanted me. The sparkle of his eyes when he thanked me after our ride through the woods.

He doesn't know the worst of me, no. But he's been there for the parts of me I have let him see. He's made a place for me.

They all have, in their own way.

Stavros, handing the sword to me a couple of hours ago. His bemused shock when he realized just how famous a thief I am.

Alek's anguished apology at my bedside. The firmness of his arms, carrying me from the library to help me hide my pain from prying eyes.

Benedikt and the flippant ease with which he can shatter any tension. The mischief in his smile after he shielded me with a kiss.

Even though I can't have everything my heart might want, I've gotten more than I'd have ever dared to imagine. That's some kind of gift, isn't it?

I don't know who I should thank for it, but I have to keep going.

Hold on to the strength and faith they offered me. Push through the agony.

Another step.

Another.

Veering around a couple of jagged chunks of marble, I reach the last stair left before the gaping hole. A faint breeze cools the sweat on my face, traveling up through the opening to mingle with the open air on the platform.

When I straighten up as tall as I can with my hand still pressed against the inner wall, I can see Wendos's head and shoulders.

I've made it. I'm close enough.

Land a dagger in his back, and he won't be tossing around any more magic.

Maybe he'll die, but at this point I don't feel I can be incredibly picky about how this confrontation ends. A whole lot of other people will die if he finishes the joint sorcery he's attempting.

As I ready my hand, Wendos sucks in an awed breath. "Yes. Yes! It's coming together— Look at all that stone coming crumbling down."

A distant crash reaches my ears even all the way up here. I lose my breath.

It's almost too late.

I whip back my arm and fling the knife forward.

At the same moment, Wendos takes a step to the side.

I clamp my lips against a noise of protest. The knife flies true—and smacks into the flesh of his upper arm that's now in its path.

Wendos yelps and clutches at his arm. He wrenches out the knife and tosses it to the floor.

Julita lets out a cheer, but my heart has sunk.

It wasn't enough after all.

"Fucking bitch," Wendos snarls. "Pin her down. Stop her from moving. I don't care how you do it."

As he spits out several more words in that odd language, I'm struck again by the invisible projectiles that must be daimon. They hurl me to the side.

My chest bangs against one of the chunks of marble, the sharp edge raking down my sternum with the rasp of tearing silk. A new sting of pain

flares across the skin beneath my now frayed bodice and undershirt.

The daimon heave me onward to slam me against the outer wall, swinging my broken leg so wildly I groan. Two, maybe three of them press against my body, resisting when I try to move.

No, no, no! Julita cries out, but no one other than me can hear her.

“Can we keep going?” the man on the floor asks in an unsteady voice. “The energies feel weakened.”

“I’m fine. I’m—” Wendos lets out a hiss of frustration. “I’m bleeding all over the fucking floor. How’m I supposed to concentrate— They’ll get loose. Torstem was counting on me... *Fuck.*”

Julita’s voice drops to a mutter. *Ha. Serves him right.*

I can’t see Wendos anymore, but I hear the scrape of his feet as he turns on his heel. I’d feel more victorious about his partial meltdown if his voice didn’t drop to a new frigid low.

“We’re so close. It’s happening—we can’t let the effort falter now. I need you. I need *everything*. For the All-Giver, for the way things should exist, for creating the world this is meant to be.”

“We understand,” one of the women says, but I don’t, not at all.

Not until, over the lip of the platform, I see one of the armless figures lurch toward the railing. She raises her face to the open air she must be able to feel even if she can’t see it.

“Hear me, godlen! I give my all to this man’s power in this moment, to letting him show the world his way!”

Her declaration rings out toward the sky—and then she pitches herself over the railing.

“No!” The protest bursts from my throat without any thought.

Julita’s presence freezes in the back of my skull. *Sky, sea, and earth, what are they doing?*

Even as a sickening thud sounds from the roof far below this tall tower, the other two figures call out their own words of sacrifice. Two more fleshy thumps of fallen bodies reach my ears.

I flinch, stomach acid burning up my throat. For a moment, I’m afraid I’m going to vomit all over my torn dress. The daimon won’t let me even buckle over.

They’ve offered a much grander momentary sacrifice than the blood-letting Wendos once inflicted on Julita. And a voluntary one.

Is it going to work? Will their fatal offerings actually—

Wendos's dark laugh gives me all the answer I need. His voice rises. "That's right! Listen to us. We command you now—all of you!"

He speaks his strange chant louder than before, letting it spill out into the thickening dusk. From far away, I think I hear a panicked shriek.

Oh, no, Julita murmurs. What do we do now?

I squeeze my eyes shut, my throat closing up too.

I can't let Wendos finish this. The elite of the inner wards don't deserve the horror he's planning to rain down on them, awful as they can be.

And what if the daimon spill their destruction over into the fringes?

What will become of Zuzanna and her sickly son, Marta and her many lovers, Frida and Ewalin gossiping while they tend to the bees...?

My magic claws up through my chest. I tense instinctively... but this time I can't dismiss it completely.

Could calling on my own power now really be *worse* than what'll happen if I don't?

I don't know. I honestly don't know. I have a monster inside me with a mind of its own.

Hopelessness washes over me in a wave, tinged with a strange sense of absurdity.

I've fought with myself for so long. Refused and refused and refused, no matter how my power hurt me.

But I'm the only one here. It's the only weapon I have left.

How can this be the answer? How can I trust myself to make that call?

Unless... Unless I'm not entirely alone.

Someone was able to control it once before. Someone who might be watching right now over a temple that bears his and his siblings' blessings.

Even as the temple itself quivers with a quake from below, both my mind and my body balk. Can I really count on the godlen, the divinities who broke souls like mine in punishment for crimes committed five hundred years ago?

What other choice do I have?

Wendos cackles madly between roughened phrases, and my resistance fractures.

I suck in a breath like a sob and will my mind to open. More and more, from the slightest quivering crack until I feel as if my fractured soul is reaching out toward the walls around me.

Godlen, I think, like I spoke in my head to the voice while I was dying. If you can hear me, please help me. Please guide my magic so I don't do harm

that's undeserved. Let me stop him without ruining something else.

Please.

No one answers. But a tingle spreads down through my lungs as if ephemeral fingers have brushed over them with the lightest touch.

I might have imagined it, but it's all I've got. There's no time left.

There's a rustle as Wendos swings his arm wildly, and I release my grip on my magic.

FORTY



My power roars out of me, smacking into the daimon pinning me down. They scatter like puffs of cloud.

The full force of my intent rams into the figure I can't even see where he's poised by the railing.

Through the magic streaming from the fissures in my soul, I feel Wendos jerk and spasm. Taste the power *he* was wielding slip from his fingers as mine devours his will and awareness.

For the space of a heartbeat, rage wells up alongside my power.

He had Julita killed—he would have happily murdered me too. He sent those poor scourge sacrifices to their deaths.

Who knows how many other innocents he's already slaughtered or meant to in his sick quest... for what?

A growl of fury passes over my lips. My power wraps around him—
And I remember.

I remember the man who attacked me seven years ago, the second and until yesterday last time I unleashed my magic. How my gut knotted when I stared down at his slumped corpse and the destruction spiraling out around it.

I remember that Wendos is only the beginning of the conspiracy, not the end. There's so much more we need to unravel if anyone's going to be safe.

With a gasp, I snatch at the power rushing out of me. I heave all the control I can summon into yanking the magic back, reining it in like it's a stallion I have to tame.

Just stop him. Just stop him—don't shatter him completely.

A giddy warmth spreads through my limbs and across my chest. I sense

Wendos's body crumpling.

I haul every shred of power I can catch back into me.

That's enough. That's enough, for now.

Gods above, let it be enough forever.

As the torrent of magic contracts, I shove myself onto my feet—and realize that I can stand without agony. Some of the damage I inflicted on Wendos must have bounced back the opposite effect into me.

The scratch on my chest has healed, my gown's bodice and the ripped chemise beneath drooping open between my breasts over smooth skin. My shin is solid.

I jerk up my head and freeze.

All across the walls of the tower, vines have sprouted. Slim, green tendrils unfurl from notches and cracks. They spread vibrant green leaves to the last hazy glow of the setting sun.

More twine together across the gap in the staircase, forming a woven ramp to seal the hole.

I dealt out harm, and I conjured new growth. And not a growth that's going to hurt anyone—not like last time.

A laugh hitches out of my throat, and I press my hand to my mouth.

I scramble to the edge of the collapsed staircase and tread more carefully onto the ramp of vines. It holds my weight with only a slight give.

No more distant rumbles or shrieks reach my ears. The tower doesn't shake again. The thrum of unsettling magic has vanished.

By cutting Wendos down, I ended whatever horrible spell he and his colleagues were constructing.

With another step, I can see him.

Wendos sprawls on his side on the floor of the tower platform, unmoving, his limbs strewn about. But as I watch, his chest lifts and falls with a halting breath.

I hit him hard, but I didn't kill him. I held on to that one bit of control.

Julita laughs more openly, with a sensation as if she's spinning excitedly in my head. *You did it! You knocked him right down.* She pauses. *What exactly was it you did?*

My lips part. Before I can decide on an answer, a different voice that's no longer unfamiliar reverberates through my nerves as if from all around me.

Well done, my wayward rogue. When you welcome me, I can come. And I suspect we'll work together again before long. But for now you have a rather

different problem to attend to.

What?

I freeze, my gaze searching the platform for potential threats—and the rasp of an indrawn breath carries from behind me.

I spin around and find myself facing three men who've stiffened where they're standing just past the final bend in the stairs.

Casimir's expression looks sickly. Alek is leaning against the wall as if he's about to fall right over.

And Stavros...

Stavros is staring at me like he's never seen me before. Staring at the bare skin down my sternum it's too late to hide, where no godden sigil brands my flesh.

Staring around me at the vegetation called up by a power no godless person should be able to wield. Past me toward the man I struck down with that power.

"I stopped him," I say, my voice coming out with a creak. "I stopped him."

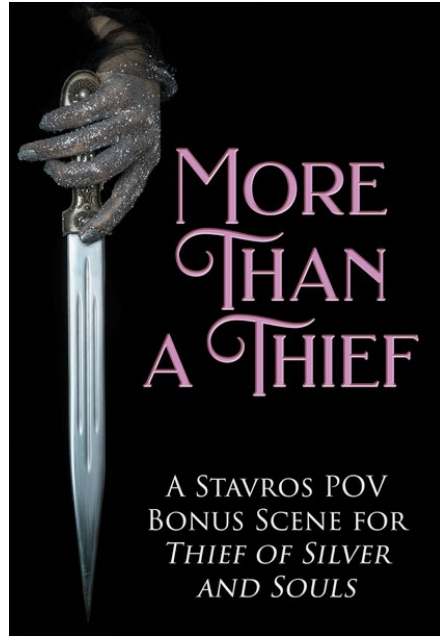
But it looks like I haven't yet paid the price.



* * *

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SHADOW THIEF

1

The story of how I was going to end the world began not with a bang or a whimper but a kerplink.

The kerplink came from the latch of an arcanelly ancient window lock hitting the sill as it disengaged. Adjusting my position on the ledge outside, I withdrew my equally ancient wedge and probe—gotta have tools that fit the job—from beneath the sash. At my tug, the window slid upward with a faint rasp.

Shadows draped the hallway on the other side even more densely than in the backyard below me, where the glow of the mansion's security lamps cut through the night. Less work for me. Dressed in black from head to toe, with my hands gloved to avoid fingerprints and my vibrant red hair tucked away

under a knit hat, I blended in perfectly.

I slipped from the flutter of the warm summer breeze into the stillness of the hall and eased the window shut. The ceiling loomed high above. The tangy scent of wood polish tickled my nose. No doubt the floorboards that showed at the edges of the Persian rug gleamed like glass in daylight.

The thick rug handily absorbed my footsteps as I slunk along it, eyeing the doors. If I'd been able to get a good view from outside, I'd have snuck straight into the room I was aiming for, but with the coverings on the other windows, it'd been impossible to know whether I'd hit the jackpot or stumble onto inhabitants I wasn't looking to meet.

Looking around now, there were a couple of signs that this wasn't the home of your typical collector. Most of them kept the rest of their living space free of anything that would hint at their secret interests, a portrait of normality. Here, paintings of eerie, twisted forms with glowing eyes hung on the walls. Farther down, a patch of thicker darkness streaked across the pale paint of the ceiling as if it'd been scorched. What the heck had this dude gotten up to?

But then I spotted the door that had to lead to his collection room, and that question fell away behind a tingle of exhilaration.

I couldn't tell exactly what kind of security I was dealing with until I got right up close and flicked on the thinnest beam on my flashlight. The sight made me grimace. Son of a donkey's uncle.

In my experience, there were two kinds of collectors. Some went all in on traditionalism, preferring esoteric fixtures and devices of times past—the older the better—to match the nature of the creatures they'd stashed away. Others valued modern tech over keeping a consistent ambiance and secured their collection areas with the most up-to-date electronics.

I preferred the former. Forget fancy do-dads hacking digital codes—it was much more satisfying getting to tackle concrete objects hands-on, like a puzzle I was putting together... or, more often, pulling apart.

This guy clearly leaned that way too. Except he leaned it way too far. One look at the mass of interlocking metal around the door's handle told me my standard picks weren't getting anywhere with that lock. I didn't encounter many that required more forceful methods. Tonight's collector was awfully paranoid about protecting his treasures.

Or he had something in there that was so special it justified the lengths he'd gone to.

A prickle of apprehension quivered down my spine. You know the feeling when you realize that the thing you're in the middle of doing might actually be a horrible idea—but you're so committed already that stopping would feel even worse? Yeah. I lived there so often I might as well have made it my permanent address.

Which meant I shrugged off the uneasiness and reached into the cloth bag hanging from my belt. I had ways of defeating even a ridiculous lock like this, and I wasn't going to let some wannabe master of the macabre get the better of me. Once I set out on a mission, I saw it through. And so far I always *had* seen them through, no matter how tricky the situation got.

I broke a pea-sized bead off my lump of explosive putty and poked it into the deepest cranny in the center of the mechanism. “Beating you with some goo, eat your fill,” I sang at a whisper to the tune of Duran Duran's “A View to a Kill.” Mangling '80s song lyrics always put me in a better mood.

Hey, everyone needs a hobby.

Bracing myself, I aimed my lighter at the cranny and flicked on the flame. The putty burst with a crackle and a puff of smoke—and the tinkle of several antique fittings shattering apart. I held myself totally still for several seconds, my ears pricked for any indication that someone in the house had noticed the sound, but the hall stayed silent.

When I pressed on the handle, the lock creaked, balked, and then crunched with a harder jerk. At my push, the door swung open.

Holy mother of mackerels, this was a collection room all right. I'd seen a lot of them, but even so, I couldn't help gaping.

The “room” looked as if it had actually been three or four rooms with the walls taken down between them, stretching like some grand ballroom into the distance. Built-in wooden shelves stuffed with books, trinkets, and other objects lined the walls on either side of me from floor to vaulted ceiling. In front of those shelves at regular intervals, globe-like lights beamed down into glinting cages not so different from those you'd expect to house birds. Their vertical bars rose into domed tops, and their bases ranged from the size of my palm to the length of my arm.

I counted at least a dozen of them spread out down the vast space. It was rare to come across a collector who'd managed to get his hands on more than a few shadow creatures. This dude had been busy.

I tore my gaze away from the cages to skim the wall and note the thick velvet curtains that covered the room's narrow windows in the few gaps

between the shelves. There were my possible escape routes.

Another, more massive velvet curtain hung across the entire width of the room at the far end. What in Pete's name lay past that?

A reddish blotch caught my eye in the middle of the blue-and-gold patterned rug. That maroon shade verging on brown—it was a bloodstain. One so big I could have lain down on it and not covered the whole thing.

A fresh twinge of nerves shot through my gut. It wasn't at all unusual for collectors to experiment with all kinds of supposed supernatural rituals, including blood-based spells, but this guy appeared to have gone all out and not made any attempt to clean up afterward. He'd left the evidence on display as if it were a valuable part of the exhibit.

There was creepy, and then there was “here's a fellow who might very well enjoy wearing other people's skin as a three-piece suit.”

Before I returned my attention to the cages, I took a few moments to browse the shelves and pocket artifacts from the dude's non-living collection—whatever looked both valuable and not so distinctive it'd be easily recognized when I sold it on the black market. I settled on a gold bangle, a large ruby set in ebony, and a handful of antique coins.

That should cover at least a few month's room and board while I figured out my next heist. A gal's got to pay the rent somehow. It seemed fitting that the collectors indirectly funded my efforts to shut them down. Call me the Robin Hood of monster emancipation.

Because that was what lurked in those cages under their spotlights. At least, the collectors called them monsters. And to be fair, for the most part the creatures that slunk through rifts from the shadow realm into our mortal one did fit the standard criteria.

Those of us who both knew of the creatures' existence—and had bothered to speak at any length with the ones capable of talking—chose our terminology with a little more respect. “Shadowkind” came in all shapes, sizes, and inclinations, and most of them were a heck of a lot *less* monstrous than the worst human beings I'd tangled with.

It was difficult to tell what exactly this guy had caged in his extensive menagerie. Shadowkind could literally meld into our world's shadows and travel through them, hence the name, but they had to be able to reach those shadows first. The spotlights were positioned to fill each entire cage and the space beyond the bars with light, preventing that sort of escape.

Distressed by their incarceration and that constant glaring light, the

creatures shrank in on themselves. I could only make out a blurred, flickering smudge of darkness in each: a glimpse of spines here, a flash of fangs there. When the collectors wanted to gloat over their prizes, they dimmed the lights just enough to coax their captives into showing themselves more clearly without allowing any full shadows to fall into range.

Silver and iron twined together to form the cages' bars and base—true to mythology, most otherworldly beings recoiled from one or both metals to some degree. Most creatures of this size weren't strong enough to leap into the shadows through the narrow spaces between those bars even if they'd had shadows to travel through. That meant freeing them was a multi-stage process.

I started with the nearest cage, drawing a dense black cloth from the larger bag on my belt and wrapping it around the light to blot out the illumination completely. Breaking the thing obviously would have done the trick faster, but even the lovers of antiquities often resorted to higher levels of tech when it came to ensuring their most valuable possessions didn't escape. Chances were high an alarm would go off if the flow of electricity were interrupted.

The same possibility existed for the cage doors. Instead of messing with the lock, I unhooked the juiced-up knife I kept at my hip, hit the button to flood the blade with heat, and applied it to the bars on the side.

The titanium tool had been enhanced not just by black-market skills but a sorcerer's supernatural efforts as well. Its blazing edge sliced through five of the bars in less than a minute. They bowed upward at a push with the flat of the blade.

The second I'd lowered the scorch-knife, the creature inside sprang through the gap. I got a clear look at it in that instant—a ball of raggedy gray fur from which six spindly legs and two bat-like wings protruded, a glitter of yellow eyes—and then it flitted off into the thicker shadows to enjoy its freedom far from here.

With a roll of my shoulders to loosen them up, I let out my breath. One down, a hell of a lot more to go.

Using the same technique, I made my way down the room one cage at a time. It was only when I'd hacked through what turned out to be the thirteenth—what a fitting number—that I glanced up and realized I'd come to the end of the line. Well, almost. I'd reached that vast curtain.

Bracing myself, I nudged one edge of it aside—and froze. More

spotlights gleamed off more silver-and-iron bars ahead of me, but the three cages that awaited me there... I'd never seen anything quite like them. Set back at the far end of the room, a good fifteen feet from where I was now standing, they loomed almost as high as the ceiling and wide enough that I couldn't have reached from one side to the other with my arms straight out.

My breath stayed locked in my lungs as I slipped past the curtain and walked toward them. What was this dude keeping in *there*? It'd have been hard enough keeping his collection of thirteen minor "monsters" properly fed and exercised so they didn't totally dwindle away. Any creatures big enough to require cages like these—they could have gobbled him up the second he made a wrong move, if they were so inclined. And it wouldn't take very long shut up in a cage to so incline them.

I'd already thought he was over-ambitious and possibly insane. Now I'd have to go with completely cuckoo, and not just for Cocoa Puffs.

As with the smaller shadowkind, the beings in the huge cages had contracted into blurry dark forms. I couldn't tell whether the cages' height was overkill or if all three were simply hunched down in that space, but they all looked like big balls of, well, shadow condensed in the lower third of the space. The ball on the left was about twice the width of the one in the middle, the one on the right somewhere in between. I caught a flicker of pale hair, a glimmer of neon-green eyes—

My foot landed on the smaller rug between me and the cages, and an electronic shriek pierced both my eardrums.

Shit! I scrambled back so quickly I could have given a professional tap dancer a run for their money, but the alarm continued blaring through the room and no doubt the whole of the mansion. A pressure sensor under the rug must have triggered it. I hadn't even thought—I probably *should* have considering the maniac I was obviously dealing with here—

No time to curse him out. No time to do anything except the bare minimum I'd come for. Whatever the hell was in those cages, they deserved their freedom just as much as the smaller beings I'd released did.

With the alarm already shrieking around me, I could throw caution to the wind. I sprinted to the first cage, chopped at the lock itself with my scorch-knife, and managed to sever it with several sawing motions. At my yank, that door flew open. To ease the captive's escape, I hurled my blackout cloth at the lamp overhead. It covered the light for only a moment before it slipped back down for me to catch it, but in that moment a presence hurtled past me

so large and so close the hairs on the back of my neck stood on end.

No time to make any formal introductions. I dashed to the second cage, sliced through that lock a little faster than the first, flung my cloth, and raced to the third without stopping for a “How do you do?” No sounds of approaching doom reached my ears through the wail of the alarm, but it was practically deafening me, so that wasn’t much comfort. It wasn’t a question of *whether* the master of the house was charging toward the room, only how quickly he could get here—and how lethal the reinforcements he’d bring would be.

As I snatched back my blackout cloth for the third time, I was already digging my final gambit out of my bag. With a pop of the bottle’s lid, I tossed a splash of kerosene across the traitorous rug. Then I whipped the flame of my lighter at it.

The damp patch caught fire with a whoosh of heat. I glanced around one last time to make sure no living things were left in the place—I hoped my signature farewell would destroy as much of his *inanimate* collection as possible, considering the uses he’d put it to—and realized that in my rush I’d nearly cut off my route to the nearest window.

Heat licked my face. I dodged to the side as the fire shot up higher. Smoke seared down my throat, and my pulse thrummed through my body with its own inner burn of adrenaline. If the flames would be kind enough to travel more to the right than to the left, attack those rows of books before it snatched at the window curtains...

Luck was on my side. The thought had barely crossed my mind when the flames flared with sharper intensity toward the bookshelves at the opposite side of the room, giving me a smidge of an opening. A shiver passed through my nerves at just how convenient that was, but who was I to argue? I dove around the growing wave of fire and whipped the curtain aside.

Without needing to think, my grappling hook was in my hand. I slammed it into the pane, and the glass burst with a rain of shards onto the patio below. As I leapt onto the ledge, I was already sighting the utility pole just beyond the nearest wall of the backyard. One swing of my arm sent the hook soaring to latch onto the fixture at the top of the pole.

A shout of rage reverberated through the room behind me. Adios, asshole. With my hands tight around the rope, I launched myself out into the much more temperate night air.

I aimed myself at the perfect angle to catch hold of one of the metal bars

protruding farther down the utility pole. Piece of cake. A flick of my wrist detached the grappling hook overhead. I clicked it onto the back of my belt, dropped down onto the sidewalk, and vanished into the shadows as completely as the creatures I'd come to save had, all ties to the place behind me severed.

At least, that was how it'd always worked before.

Despite the weirdness I'd encountered on the mission, everything about my escape appeared to go perfectly smoothly. I arrived back at my apartment in the wee hours of the morning, showered the smoke stink out of my hair, and curled up in bed. When I woke up, the sun was beaming outside, the birds were chirping, and I had new treasures to sell sitting on my desk.

I poked at them, grinning at the thought of the cash they'd bring in and the collector who'd now hopefully be agonizing at least as much over his loss as his captives had in their cages, and headed down the hall to grab some breakfast singing, "How wrong, how wrong was that dinged-up dong. How wrong, how—"

My voice jarred in my throat. I jerked to a halt a few steps from my kitchen, which was currently inhabited by three inexcusably stunning—and unfamiliar—men.

Who are these gorgeous men, and what do they want with Sorsha? [Find out in Shadow Thief - Grab your copy now!](#)

ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Eva Chase lives in Canada with her family. She loves stories both swoony and supernatural, and strong women and the men who appreciate them.

Along with the Rites of Possession series, she is the author of the Shadowblood Souls series, the Heart of a Monster series, the Gang of Ghouls series, the Bound to the Fae series, the Flirting with Monsters series, the Cursed Studies trilogy, the Royals of Villain Academy series, the Moriarty's Men series, the Looking Glass Curse trilogy, the Their Dark Valkyrie series, the Witch's Consorts series, the Dragon Shifter's Mates series, the Demons of Fame series, and the Legends Reborn trilogy.

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