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The Weight of the Stars

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the
requirements for the degree of Master of Fine Arts
in English

by

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Abstract: *The Weight of the Stars* is a foray into the genre of epic fantasy. Based on observations of both classic and contemporary fantasy, this novel is intended as a response to long-held traditions within the genre. *The Weight of the Stars* seeks to complicate those familiar tropes and reflect a more diverse world. The purpose of this novel is to spark conversation about contemporary problems through the lens of separation creative fiction affords. In *The Weight of the Stars*, several disparate heroes find their stories intersecting in strange, sometimes heartbreaking ways, as they struggle to find hope in a world of literal darkness.

Chapter One

Elbeda woke before the first quarter bell rang. She dressed herself silently and packed a small sack with bread, a candle, and her spare dress. The air had a chill to it, despite the heavy cloak she wore. Elbeda pulled the fur-lined garment tight around her arms, shivering as she waited for her own trapped body heat to warm her.

The fireducts overhead lit the dirt road in splotches of orange glow against black shadows. Always, the ducts were lit, but fourth quarter they were kept dim by starving them of the thick, black oil on which they fed. Elbeda remembered the first time she saw them, like a maze for the gods crisscrossed over the entire city. She'd never seen so much light—in her entire life, her family had been afraid to burn a candle for too long for fear of being exposed like a raw nerve in the ever-present darkness. The sight of the flames licking at the inky heavens made her ache for her brother, Rorik. What a tale she would have spun for him.

A sad smile tugged at her lips. He would have wanted to know if this is what the sky looked like before Sorea cursed the land and took away the sun, the moon, the stars. The empty heavens cried of wrongness, and even looking to them put a twinge of discomfort in Elbeda's gut now. Having never seen a sun, or a moon, or star, Elbeda couldn't really say if their light was like the flames. Perhaps the entire heavens had been consumed by fire, and everywhere the air was hot, and the ground scorched, and no winter touched the world. These questions were beyond her.

A grouping of soldiers milled around the streets. Elbeda kept her gaze downcast and her gait clipped. Soldiers were known to hassle women who walked the streets unaccompanied. Elbeda couldn't afford that attention.

She stopped at the well to fill her canteen. She'd need it. The nearest source of water outside the citadel was nearly a week's hike. Here she stood, watching the reflected flames dance across the surface of the well-water. A part of her ached to go back, and slip under the furs, snuggle into Beaumont's side, and run her fingers through his greying hair.

But she was late and she didn't know how to tell him. They never talked about children. Maybe because she had been a child when he first found her on the streets of Scianne. He should have turned her over to *ir Drogkarnor's* guards. Elbeda reminded herself that he was called the Lord Dictate here. Even after nearly a decade, her roots still dragged her back to Devri.

They never spoke of children so Beaumont didn't know that she had to leave. She had to cross the Crook'd Spine, the Narrows, the Barren Straits, and have her mother present her to the *Adumadorn*. All women in the Eantol Collective who became pregnant were expected to make this pilgrimage. So few of them were able to bare children, that every one born was a sign of the Allmother's blessing.

"I heard the news, dear. Congratulations," an elderly woman said.

Elbeda gave a start, unsure of how long the woman had been standing across from her, fixing her with a beady stare. Elbeda couldn't remember the woman's name but knew she had recently inherited her father's home which directly abutted Beaumont's on the eastern wall. "Did I startle you? You look like you've caught the vision."

“Sorry—how did you know?” Elbeda’s hand went instinctively to her stomach. But the well was between the women and the old woman laughed, not having seen the gesture.

“All the women have been talking about it. What an honor for Beaumont to be selected to make the urn for the late First Son.”

The tension coiled in Elbeda’s gut slowly released its grip. Of course, the woman meant to congratulate Beaumont. Elbeda still found it strange how the Sciannese women were treated as inconsequential and acted as such. But so much was different here. She said, “yes, it’s very exciting. He’s been invited to attend the ceremony.”

The burial ceremony was scheduled to be held in three days’ time. The whole city bustled full with the task of throwing the feast and honoring the fallen son. All the best grain, and meat, and oils, and vegetables at market were requisitioned for the ceremony, and Elbeda had been scraping mold off of the scraps of hers and Beaumont’s last loaf for days. Seamstresses sewed with bloody fingers round the clock to dress the upper nobility in the finest attire while their assistants darned and mended the poorer folk’s best items.

“Will you be going with him?”

“Oh, I don’t know.” Elbeda lied. She would be far away from Scianne by the time the ceremony was held. If she were honest, she was glad for any excuse to be absent. She found most palace rituals strange and off-putting.

Elbeda bid the woman goodnight and pretended to head back to home. She called it a home, but it was really a row of connected fire-dried mud brick dwellings connected to each other on the eastern and western walls. The open doorways faced the palace as all the Scianne’s buildings did. The palace cut into the side of a mountain, and the rest of

the city crowded around the base in semi-concentric rings. Nearest to the palace were the stone and firebrick homes with built-in chimneys and small plots of land for gardens or pens for livestock. The next ring was the largest, and the one where Beaumont's home stood: the artisan district. Homes in her ring were usually conjoined with three or four other family's structures with shared work and garden spaces.

The ring furthest from the palace was called The Gutter by those in the more established rings. Many of these families lived on dirt patches. The lucky among them had small huts built of branches and thatched roofs. Elbeda spent most of her early time in Scianne in The Gutter. She did not remember these times fondly.

She slipped between the gap of two rows of wattle and daub homes and circled back around on a narrow lane that deposited her out of the well's sight. A man shepherded a group of glazy-eyed children through the narrow street. Elbeda joined the people who parted before the group. Every couple steps the man would shout out the count they were on. Nobody in the street spoke until the parade passed. The punishment for interrupting a clockman-in-training was having your tongue torn out and fed to the poor. The interrupted clockman would then have to begin training all over again. Eventually the clockmen progressed to the point where they could interact normally with people while still holding the count in their head. A marvel really. Some of Eantol had a similar caste of person called time-keeps, but Devri had been too small for one of these. Time kept itself, mysterious and turgid there.

When the group of clockmen passed, Elbeda hurried on her way. The dirt street widened just before she reached The Gutter. The fireducts grew fewer here, and the darkness crouched all around her, beckoning her. Once the darkness wouldn't have

bothered her, but a decade of interminable light running through the city and candles burning at all hours, it would smother her.

Usually the Gutter-folk stuck to those shadows—eyes agleam for some trinket worth the take. They were the poor, the dirty—banded together to take what no one else would give them to survive. Here, she was mostly safe; her knapsack hung hidden beneath her cloak, and even though it was the nicest thing she owned, the cloak itself did not speak of wealth. At this quarter, most people would have been sleeping, but the ceremonial fire bowl was lit—a sign that a public punishment was in progress.

Elbeda hung back from the group of people shoving each other and shouting. In the center of the crowd, on a stone platform, two soldiers were holding a man down. A third soldier secured the man's jaw open with a glowing iron hook that pulled at each corner of his mouth. Elbeda trembled. Around her, people shouted encouragement to the soldiers or offered advice on how to make the punishment more painful. A woman held two young children to her breast and wept. The mob gave them a telling berth—the condemned man's family.

“What is his crime?” Elbeda asked a old man with a patch of cloth hung over one eye and tied behind his head.

“Blasphemy against the Lord Dictate.” The *s* in *Blasphemy* and *against* whistled through the gaping hole where his front teeth should have been and his breath smelled of rot. Elbeda offered a weak smile, and passed behind the man. She'd best be on her way.

The third soldier placed the forceps on the man's tongue and ripped it from his mouth. He flung the tongue into the fire bowl and the crowd roared its approval. Elbeda felt nauseous as she fought her way through the crowd. At least this man's tongue had

come out cleanly. When she had first arrived in The Gutter six years ago, she'd seen another tongue ripping punishment. The woman had squirmed when they tried to place the forceps on her tongue and as a result, her tongue had been split in half with only a small portion of the left side being removed. The Lord Dictate had allowed her to live, and the people had called her Two-Tongue ever since. Rumors spread about her current location. Some said she was a feral woman now, living in the forests outside of Scianne's outer wall. Others said she lived in the Lord Dictate's palace and was brought out for the amusement of the court and as a warning to his enemies. Elbeda thought both rumors were equally cruel, but no more so than any of the other punishments she'd seen delivered in her time in Scianne.

Elbeda cleared the crowd and the tightness in her chest eased a little. She wondered what her punishment would be if the Lord Dictate discovered her true origins. Beaumont told everyone she was from Birgried—another loyal city to the Lord Dictate, but it was far enough away that there was little chance anyone would know her supposed relatives or ask after her. She wasn't anything to look after with lust, but she knew it was likely she'd be put to work whoring in the soldier's encampment at the city wall or within the palace itself. And if the Lord Dictate knew she carried a child, she would more likely face a worse fate as a breeding slave.

Ahead of her, the remaining fireducts converged along the upper crest of the outer wall's tower gate. This was the only public crossing point for those wishing entry or exit from Scianne proper. As a malnourished child, she'd been able to slip through a series of grates at the base of the wall, and wade through the sluggish moat. She was much too big for such an adventure now, and she bore a mark—had paid for it with flesh and tears.

When she thought on it, she could still taste the sweat-tinged leather between her teeth, and smell her burning skin where the brand touched her.

The rough stone wall towered so high above her head that standing alongside it she could not look up and see its end. It caught eerie shifting shadows from the fire which gave it the illusion of being in motion. A series of narrow steps jutted out from the wall, leading into the tower. The guards would be cloistered there, the gatekeepers between her and her duty. For a moment, she lingered at the base of the stairway. She nearly turned back when she thought of Beaumont waking, the silt from the urn turned to dust on his hands and face, to find her gone. He'd been so good to her—better than she had any right to ask for—and although she didn't love him, she bore him no ill-will. After all, she knew he shared no blame in why his affection always made her uncomfortable. She couldn't help that it reminded her of the way her father had rubbed her budding breasts and pinched her ass once she'd bled for the first time. He was the reason she'd left Eantol, Rorik, and home behind. The first time he slid three fingers into her and played with himself, she'd left and never until this day considered returning. She hated that he had overshadowed her relationship with Beaumont. No matter how kind Beaumont was to her, she'd always think of those moments of stolen innocence when he touched her. She'd never found the right words to tell him, and now she never would. She hoped he wouldn't think he'd somehow wronged her.

But even the weight of that guilt on her conscience couldn't allay her journey. Regardless of the price, she knew she must go, so Elbeda kept one hand firmly on the wall to steady herself for the climb and for what would come after.

Chapter Two

Giaben woke, sobbing and clinging to his pillow. He muttered into the damp pillow, “I’m sorry. I’m so sorry.”

The cries of the dead still clawed at his ears, and his hands went to the places where the past marked his body. He traced one of the deep grooved lines starting in his midback down to his waist. The pain was no longer physical, but he shook as he touched it. He’d done this since he was a small child, whenever he roused from troubled sleep. The scars helped ground him back in reality—reminded him that the worst had already happened, and he’d survived.

But he wasn’t young anymore, and his cries in the night no longer went unobserved. Perhaps unobserved was the wrong way to put it. As a child, the soldier’s who’d cared for him heard his cries, but no one spoke about them, and no one avoided his eyes during mess. But they’d all seen battle together now, and if any other man had the terrors, he spoke of it to no one, and he did not cry out in the sleeping quarter of the night. In this Giaben was singularly afflicted.

Firelight filtered through the canvas tent opening, cutting through the near-opaque dark. Giaben knew instinctively he’d roused Rans. Giaben could just make out his friend’s silhouette against the soft flickering light. Rans said, “You were screaming in your sleep—another night terror?”

Gaiben kneaded his eyes with his knuckles and tried to shake off the lingering melancholia. Although left unvoiced, Giaben heard the implication behind *another*—the gentle reminder that this was not the first time in the recent past that he’s woken his friend from sleep. Giaben said, “I-I’m fine.”

Sweat from his knuckles stung his eyes. He wanted to apologize, but Rans found apologies tedious and preferred to leave all grievances unspoken. Rans had been raised among the other soldiers from birth. Concessions and emotions outside of battle were ill-fitted to his personality, and any empathy in him, merely an accidental happenstance. To call on it openly would have been an insult, at least to Rans' sensibility.

"Hmm," Rans harrumphed. "You're a terrible liar."

A grin broke over Gaiben's face. A sad, mirthless grin meant only to allay his friend's concern. He sat up and ran his fingers through his hair. It was getting too long—starting to curl at his temples and around his ears. For lack of a better, easier topic, Gaiben asked, "Is it time for our sentry duty?"

"Almost," Rans replied. Gaiben saw suddenly, that he must not have been the one to wake his friend. Rans was already in his armor and had his sword lain across his lap. "The second quarter bell's not yet rung."

All the things Gaiben wanted to say hung between the men like a dark cloud. "Good. I need a minute."

"I'll leave you to it," Rans said. He turned and left, ducking through the flap in their canvas tent. Gaiben watched him go—watched the loose tunic shift with his movement, and imagined his muscles straining against the confines of his smooth skin. Gaiben had seen him naked often enough to not leave much to imagination. But the part that remained firmly a fantasy was the thought of pressing himself into that warm, smooth embrace and finding more than friendship. Then Rans was gone. The tent shifted with the night's breeze, and the laughter and frivolity of the last evening had all but died out. Their camp's fire still crackled, inconstant and jarring in the near-silence.

Every time he thought he was doing well to hide the guilt and doubt, Giaben slipped up. Shame was hot on his cheeks. None of the other men cried out in their sleep. Usually, Rans shook him awake, and cupped his head to his breast. Giaben found he valued those brief embraces, captured between heartbeats, over all others. Giaben slid his legs over the edge of the cot. He needed to free himself from the tangles of emotion and slumber, and prepare for the day.

He exchanged his tunic for his uniform, pulling the rough linen garment over his head and then folding it up. As he tightened the leather straps of his chest plate, he cringed. Surely Rans would tell the commander about this latest infraction. He laced up his arm guard and slid his sword into its scabbard. The last time the nightmares had been this bad, Giaben had wandered into the forest outside of camp, and tried to hang himself from the branches of a sturdy elm. Rans had found him before death took him, and cut him free of the noose. His friend had informed on him then. Giaben still remembered when Jos called him into the command tent. He was prepared for anger, resentment, and perhaps even punishment—which ironically, would have been capital—but not the man's sorrows. Jos was, perhaps, the only man who truly knew Giaben, and as such, his disappointment had been crushing. He'd not tried to significantly harm himself since that day, although he thought of doing so often, when the terrors struck him in the night.

He stood ready, but his feet were heavy when Rans poked his head back into tent and said, "C'mon, Gaiben, we'll likely be late."

"Of course," Gaiben replied, and followed Rans out into the camp.

The great city of Scianne laid just to the east, and beyond that the coal mines belched putrid fumes into the skies. The city proper was lit through a series of troughs

filled with oil constructed above the rooftops that was kept aflame constantly by the firesmiths. Giaben couldn't remember the name of the original firesmith who'd conceived of the notion of the ducts, centuries ago when the Sciannese wandered around with special contraptions to hold their candles. So many ladies' skirts caught fire, that The Lord Dictate instituted a brigade of seamstresses to design new skirts without so many petticoats and cages so there was less fabric to feed the flames. Giaben couldn't really imagine ladies with skirts wider than doorways swishing about with candles in the new night. Even now, when darkness had hung eternal over the world for near five centuries, the light comforted the soldier.

Rans, who strode a little in front, but near enough to see his friend's expression.

"Stop brooding."

"I'm not brooding." Giaben said. "I'm thinking."

"Uh-huh," Rans said. He didn't say anything else as they walked.

Their post was to the outer gates of the city. Gaiben bore the rank of captain because he had an unnatural ability to recognize the birth runes used to mark Sciannese from slaves, prisoners, or border dwellers. He'd heard other people talk about how the marks swam, transposed, blurred or rearranged themselves when they tried to read or distinguish between runes. Giaben's eyes watered, and often he had splitting headaches after working his watch, but he could, for brief times, hold them steady enough to determine who was allowed to travel, and who was not.

The other men were already waiting in the keep of the drawbridge. In the center of the keep, a tall, dark haired woman stood. Dolbreth was examining her neck. When he and the other soldiers saw Giaben and Rans, they all saluted with a dull thud of fists

against their breastplate. The woman flinched at the sound. Rans and Giaben exchanged a glance.

Giaben nodded towards the woman and asked, “who is waiting?”

The woman glanced at Giaben. She was younger than he had first thought—barely in her womanhood. She was slender, and held her hands tight across her stomach. Her eyes were dark and fear pooled in their recesses.

Dolbreth responded. “Says her name is Elbeda. She’s traveling without her betrothed, Beaumont.”

Giaben couldn’t put his finger on what was different about her. Most people were uncomfortable at best, terrified at worst when dealing with soldiers, but her fear seemed somehow deeper. He asked, “where to?”

“Birgried.”

A bordertown about as far from Scianne’s epicenter as the kingdom reached. Not too many people made a pilgrimage of that distance. Not with the bandits and rebels attacking loyalists on the road. Giaben prodded her a little, trying to figure out what she was holding back. “Why does your betrothed allow you to travel alone on the treacherous roads between here and Birgried?”

Her voice wobbled as she spoke. “Surely you know of the First Son’s passing, may Nevidda keep his soul. My Beaumont has the sad honor of crafting his urn. He must stay and make sure the urn is worthy of its purpose.”

Giaben frowned. He pushed the girl’s dark hair back over her shoulder so he could see her brand. He ran his fingers over the mark. The broken circle was still raised. By her age, it should have been smoother, whiter. His vision was swimming a little from

holding the mark steady in his mind. Something was not quite right. The lines seemed too thick for the official brand, and the circle was not fully closed.

Hilden's squeaky voice broke the tension of the silence, saying, "I don't think we should take her at her word. Let us *interrogate* her to see if she has spoken true."

The woman stepped back. Her wide eyes held the firelight in their dark ring. "I have spoken only the truth, please."

Hilden always asked to *interrogate* the pretty women who crossed the gate. No matter how many times Giaben forbade it, he still got that gleam in his eyes. The thought of performing or witnessing one of these interrogations made Giaben want to hurl. He was grateful when Rans interceded.

"I have heard of this Beaumont and he is indeed the artisan making the First Son's urn," Rans said. Giaben admired the way Rans always sensed the right way to defuse a fight. That was ranked highly among Rans' qualities Giaben found attractive—not the least because he was always escalating fights, and relied on Rans to ease the tension.

Hilden asked, "wouldn't you be more certain if she demonstrated her loyalty?"

"There will be no interrogations under my watch Hilden. Resume your post."

Giaben gritted his teeth. He had a choice to make—one he might pay for with his life if it was discovered. The girl was certainly not Sciannese; her mark was too fresh. He should imprison her and bring her before the Lord Dictate. That would spell her torture and probable death . . . or in the very least, her enslavement. Enslavement would make Hilden's *interrogations* seem pleasant.

Or he could let her pass. Let her pass and hope their paths did not intersect again. She could be anything from a refugee to a spy for the Eantol Collective. He knew he stalled a moment too long, so he made the decision he thought would help him sleep dreamlessly.

“Be sure to stay on the official roads miss, we’ve heard tales of bandits and ruffians hassling travelers. Our Lord Dictate has posted extra regimens of his soldiers on the official roads to protect his citizenry.”

The woman nodded. She looked away too quickly; he couldn’t tell if she took his meaning.

“Good,” he said, “Safe travels miss.”

#

The rest of their shift passed, uneventful and quiet. Upon their return to camp, they found the fires burning yet, though not as heartily attended as they had been earlier. A few of the whores—Rini among them—entertained the dwindling number of soldiers with ales and attention. Rini waved Rans over, the baubles on her arms clanking merrily. Her cheeks were splotted from the heat of the fire and alcohol. She gave Rans a sloppy kiss, and draped one of her slender arms around his neck. Peeking over Rans’ shoulders, she asked, “Care to join us, Captain?”

A couple of the other soldiers snickered, but Giaben was used to these barbs. Most soldiers didn’t antagonize him directly. He’d earned the nickname *daekkar* with good reason; he fought like he was possessed—he had to if he meant to forget the role he now played in the extinction of his own people. But off the battlefield, he was too timid,

too reserved to join in with the men's merriment. He didn't use the women, and the drinks worsened his moody spells. But he sat with Rans and Rini now.

The chatter around this bonfire sputtered out. A few of the unattached women exchanged glances. No doubt playing at a game of who would attempt to beguile him. Giaben lowered his gaze and waited for the pity to pass. What a small existence it must feel to these girls—taken from a homeland which revered them—made to serve and suffer the appetites of their captors. Not all of the men were cruel. Not intentionally. For some, this was the closest they would ever get to true affection, and that was nearly as sad to Giaben. But he knew firsthand, the ravenous deprivation that hunkered in *some* of the others. They watched the girl's with hooded eyes, waiting until out of the company of others to strike. These men, with their games of pain, and their willingness to inflict even death, were all Giaben had known of the carnal world.

He accepted a mug of ale from one of the girls. He supposed she was pretty to men who wanted that sort of thing, but he looked past her to Rans. He clung to the mug, grasping it tightly to keep his hands from searching out his scars once more.

“Such a handsome man, to be drinking alone,” the girl said.

Giaben couldn't tell if her hair was really as orange as it appeared in the firelight. He knew the familiar heat of flushed cheeks on his face. He didn't know how to properly respond to that in some way which didn't end up with the two tangled in furs, looking down at his limp member. He said, “What's your name?”

“Vae.”

“Your real name. The one you carried before we gave you Vae.”

One of the other girls gave a nervous chuckle, and two of the pairings around the fire moved off for more secluded spots. Vae sat down on the log next to Giaben. She leaned into his side, her hand clumsy in his lap. “Valyanni.”

Giaben lifted her hand from his thigh and laid it back on her own. He said, “those who know me call me Giaben.”

He, too, once carried a different name. Galbennor. But he couldn't say that out loud, here or ever. Valyanni's painted face was a mask. But her eyes were dark, and she picked at the undersides of her nails, “Do you find me displeasing?”

Giaben said no at the same time that Rans butted in, saying, “Giaben finds all us amoral beings displeasing.”

“Walk with me,” Giaben said crossly. Rini, who was quite comfortably cradled in Rans' embrace made a shooing motion with both her hands. Her smile was just mischievous enough to appear selfishly inclined, but Giaben had known her almost as long as he had Rans, and knew she meant to comfort the girl.

Giaben escorted the girl to a clearing a short distance into the wooded area around camp. Here, a grand tree had been hewn, leaving behind a stump that was easily wide enough for the pair of them. “This is my favorite place.”

“It's quiet.” She said it quizzically, and Giaben could not infer her purpose for saying so.

The fire of the camp and the ducts over the city were so far away that the weight of the black, lightless sky bore down on them in full. Valyanni sat, face tilted upwards. Giaben wondered if she was offering a silent prayer to the mother goddess. He'd long ago

forgot the words for the proper supplication, but felt the urge to offer a sacred token when he stood before the unknown vastness of her creation.

“I find it easier to be myself,” he said. He wanted to add some clause about the judgements of the gods being different from men, but the only god they could talk about was their Lord Dictate, and that was not the god he meant.

Valyanni spoke, tremblesome and mute, “I have lost myself.”

“I thought you might be new.”

“Are you going to bed me?”

“No,” Giaben told her. he heard the long, heavy breath that slid between her lips. “But I wouldn’t mind if you sat with me awhile.”

“As you say.”

Giaben knew she had no choice, but thought he heard some gladness in her voice. His feet pressed against the cold ground. The unsettling sensation of the ground vibrating with the footfalls of the approaching troops back from campaign for the funeral crept into Gaiben’s mind. Once there, he couldn’t dislodge it. His mind wandered back to the other girl—Elbeda. He hoped she would heed his warning and stay off the main road.

Chapter 3

The shadows playing across the wall distracted Dareund from his lessons. One of his younger brothers recited the story of their father's victory over one of the numerous conquered tribes. All the stories started to sound the same after a decade of learning and reciting them. Backwards villagers skewered and flayed, their villages united under his rule. Dareund stifled a yawn and imagined he could see the future in the flames.

In that future, Dynna still lived. They had run away together and settled in a small hamlet untouched by the violence of the Sciannese Empire. She still smelled of smoked meats and lily nosegays, even though she no longer slaved away in the castle kitchen. Everything from the air to her urgent kisses tasted of the briny sea. In his future, Dareund was not one of the hundreds of sons of the Lord Dictate but a simple farmer . . . or fisherman. Fisherman sounded better to Dareund. He liked to think the sea would agree with him—that melodic sway of water as far as the eye might see. Perhaps even, the mythic sun would never have been cursed from the sky. The idea of morning light shining through the tangles of Dynna's fiery hair might be the most beautiful sight he'd never see.

“Hey—*hipschet*.”

Dareund shook the dream free. His brother Oran was pressing the bottom of his foot insistently into the small of Dareund's back. Despite only being a year older than Dareund, Oran was thick-boned and already through the worst of puberty. Muscles bulged across his barrel chest and his arms strained against what should have been a loose tunic. Had they been standing, Oran would have towered over Dareund by a full two heads. Anywhere else, Dareund knew Oran would have the better of him, but in the

classroom, they were equals. Oran's full-blood brothers were sitting next to him, Jib grinning and Zadimn watching him with small, nearly lifeless eyes. Oran looked over at Kendau, but the tutor was enrapt by the student delivering his oration. He leaned closer to Dareund and whispered, "Do you dream father will choose you for the First Son, *hipschet*?"

The Lord Dictate had never before chosen a mixed-blood prince to be the First Son. But the Lord Dictate had never before loved a slave the way he cared for Dareund's mother. No one spoke of it openly, but Dareund heard the whispers around the court: his father loved his mother because she looked like the witch—Sorea. People meant this to be pejorative, but his mother's status remained untainted by their jealousy. His status too.

"Scared?" Dareund replied. "Or are you still upset that you sit farther away from our father than the *hipschet* and his mother?"

Oran's lips twisted into a snarl. The rage lurking in the depth of his black eyes flared. Zadimn laid a hand across Oran's arm—a warning not to fight here. No, the three would catch up with him later in some shadowy corridor to finish the confrontation. Dareund winked at his brother before turning around to face the front of the chamber. Nothing made Oran angrier than when Dareund pretended to be unfazed by his taunts. Besides, it was almost his turn to recite.

He'd chosen to orate the story of the First Victory today, and he'd been practicing for nearly a fortnight. He liked the story better the more he told it. For some reason, each recitation strengthened his belief that the tale was less set in stone, less bleak than the rest of the victories—as if he might change the outcome if only he could recall each detail

perfectly. But he wasn't a child anymore, and at fourteen he understood the world didn't work that way.

The heavy wooden doors swung open behind them and hush fell across the room. Six guards wearing his father's sigil, a red sash, entered and spread out throughout the room. A nervous rustling marred the silence as the youngest sons strained their necks to catch a glimpse of their father as he entered. The Lord Dictate was a tall man, unnaturally so. Dareund thought perhaps he grew taller with each passing century, but nobody really knew how magic or immortality worked anymore. His eyes were dark, like Oran's, and his long black hair was swept away from his face, pinned in place by his glittering, obsidian crown.

Dareund felt a cold sweat run down his back. He got the same uneasy premonition every time he saw his father in a setting more intimate than the overcrowded dining chamber. Even though he had only spoken to him privately once, the experience still filled his with dread.

"Time has come for me to perform the ritual." His father's voice was quiet, cold but no less ruthless for its softness. Dareund had only been five during the last ritual and couldn't remember much about it except that his father had washed his forehead with a smelly oil and pressed his lips to the spot for an uncomfortably long time. The ritual was supposed to help the Lord Dictate decide which of his sons was best suited to become the next First Son. Some people believed the oil helped him read their minds. Others thought he could see visions of the future when he kissed each boy. Either way, Dareund found the entire ordeal unnerving.

One of the guards produced a vial of the oil Dareund remembered. The Lord Dictate dabbed his finger in the vial and consecrated each of Dareund's brothers in turn. Dareund's chest felt strangely tight and his heart plunked away at an irregular pace that increased as his father neared his spot. He tried to find that peaceful place where the sea rocked him and Dynna in its embrace, but the shadows had seemingly swallowed it up.

“My son.”

Dareund felt as if all the warmth was leeches from the spot where his father's thumb smeared the oil. His father's finger wasn't physically cold, but Dareund had to grit his teeth to keep from shivering from the caress. Dareund tilted his chin up and closed his eyes. The moment his father's lips met his flesh, a blinding pain stole his breath. An image came unbidden to his mind. Dynna—not alive and wrapped in the brackish sea, but dead—her fire-melted skin peeling away from white-knobbed bones. Dareund's fingernails drew blood from his palms. Just when he thought he couldn't stand another moment of the pain, his father broke contact and the searing spot in his mind faded, and he took a slow, desperate breath.

The fire running through the trough around the base of the chamber walls flared brighter. If the other boys were aware of the strange exchange passing between Dareund and his father they didn't show it. Dareund held his father's gaze for a few beats of his heart before he bowed his head to the stone floor and said, “My Lord.”

His father grunted and moved to Oran and his brothers. A silent sigh escaped his lips in a rush and the tension holding his erect lifted. He felt exhausted—as if he'd climbed up a thousand-stair passage and the air was too thin.

When every son was tested through the ritual, the Lord Dictate turned to Kendau and said, “Continue with your lessons.”

“The princes have chosen a history to recite. You are welcome to observe their recitations.”

The Lord Dictate’s eyes passed over the room casually. “Indeed.”

“Dareund?” Kendau asked, “Which history have you prepared for today?”

Dareund took a few deep panicked breaths and hoped no one saw the hard lump he swallowed. Beads of sweat wet his upper lip and forehead. “I have prepared the history of the First Victory as told to me by Master Liwenne, as told to him by Master Rumka, as told through each generation of the historians from one who witnessed the victory first hand.”

“Very well,” Kendau said with a sweeping gesture of his hand.

Dareund stood slowly. His knees trembled, and he couldn’t remember the rhythm he’d practiced. The words were distant, and the only thought he could muster was how dark and heavy his father’s eyes were as they rested on him. He began with the customary phrasing. “It is said that once the sky was on fire half the day, and people could decipher the written texts at their pleasure, but it was also a time of violence and struggle. It is said that before Scianne rose from the chaos of Geon to unite all kingdoms, the people were ruled by the whim of the *Mijudern*. The high priestess, Sorea controlled all those with *miju* and set arbitrary laws. She kept all books, scrolls, letters, and all transcribed oral knowledge hidden away from others in the *Mijudern* temples. She and her acolytes kidnapped young children with the gift and sequestered them from others while teaching them the secret rituals and spells.

“The witch Sorea fell in love with a young man named Fransel—our very Lord Dictate, then a young man. He tried to convince her that the *Mijudern* had lost their way and no longer honored the magic granted them from the gods, but she didn’t listen.

“Fransel gathered a group of like-minded revolutionaries and to sack the *Mijudern* temple and return the books and power to the people. During the attack, Sorea sent a young girl to guard the most sacred text, the *Mijudein*. Sorea ensorcelled the girl and bound her to the book. When the young girl died to protect the knowledge contained in the *Mijudein*, the book was transported to the other realm with the girl’s spirit.

“Fransel knew then that he could not save Sorea. So he went to confront her. When she saw the strength of his power, Sorea fled to her tower overlooking the city. There she cast a spell with her lifeblood. She cursed the sky with darkness so that the people of Geon would be lost, and she cursed the written texts that no man or woman would be able to read them.

“Fransel was too late to stop her, but he took control of the city and renamed it Scianne, meaning beacon of hope. He vowed to protect the people and bring order to his new kingdom. He has ruled ever since, blessed by the gods with long life. And our kingdom has flourished evermore.”

Dareund smoothed the front of his tunic in an attempt to also wipe the sweat from his palms.

Kendau asked, “And what do we learn from the history of the First Victory?”

“People do not start out with the intent to do evil. Evil people often do not see themselves as the villain. Sorea’s hubris was her own darkness. She doomed future generations with darkness, both mental and physical, because her pride would not allow

her to concede. We must be vigilant in our loyalty to our Lord Dictate. He is our protector and benefactor.”

“I don’t believe that is what Master Liwenne or Rumka would say is the lesson.” Kendau pointed at the ground and Dareund returned to his seat. Kendau turned back to the entire class. He said, “The First Victory was inevitable, as is the fall of the Eantol Collective. Progress and moral rectitude will always win out.”

Kendau called on the next prince to recite a history. Dareund couldn’t focus; he felt the weight of his father’s gaze return to him. He couldn’t confess the real reasons he liked the story. He’d seen a portrait of the witch, and she bore a striking resemblance to his mother. Dareund couldn’t help but think his father once held affection for Sorea, and that was why he favored Dareund’s mother, even though she was Eantolean. Perhaps that was why he also favored Dareund. Dareund had inherited his looks from her. He wished he knew what his father thought as his eyes traced Dareund’s movements.

#

Dareund always felt peaceful in the solitude of the underground chamber. He and Dynna had stumbled upon it while trying to find a secret spot for their rendezvous. Through a trap door, down a spiral staircase into the belly of the earth laid a forgotten chamber. No fireducts lined the chamber walls. He brought some flints to light one of the torches that hung from the wall.

The soft orange glow spread through the room. Dareund ran his fingers through the heavy layer of dust that coated everything in the room. A large tapestry hung between shelves of books. A young, white-haired woman stared down at him. No matter where he stood, her eyes appeared to settle on him. This was the woman his people hated for her

curse upon their land: Sorea. In a way, he felt akin to her. His fair complexion, white hair, and cold blue eyes had earned him the moniker “The Pale Prince.” But it was more than looks that he felt bound him to the woman—her eyes seemed unbearably sad and lonely.

The idea that he could be related to the woman was not so farfetched. After all, he was a *hipschet*, born of two bloodlines. The Eantolean people were fair like him and his mother, and somewhere in the far past they probably had Eantolean ancestors. But Dareund couldn't quite picture this young woman as a distant, many times over, great-grandmother.

Instead, he imagined she was the patron of the small collection. He rubbed the coarse material between his thumb and forefinger before moving to the adjacent bookshelf. He selected one of the leather-bound bundles of parchment. He untied the small cord that held the book shut and let the pages fall open.

Naturally the symbols were indecipherable. When he tried to trace them with his eyes, they swam across the page—morphing. If he squinted just right, he could make out one or two of the markings. The pictures were easier. The scribe often illustrated the columns and loose-leaf pages with ink drawings. This book showed a woman descending from the sky and a man on his knees on a mountaintop. Dareund couldn't be sure, but he thought it was probably an illustration of the myth of *Oldred and the Bloody Blade*.

Although strictly forbidden, his mother used to recount Eantoli lore in the privacy of their bedchambers. He no longer slept in the same chamber as his mother and he missed the legends. The three-quarters gong reverberated through the floor and walls. He ought to be back in his chambers preparing for the feast. No doubt his mother and Une

were in a panic searching for him. Dareund slid the book back into line with the others on the shelf. Perhaps after the feast he would return to the chamber.

#

Dareund entered the corridor and beat some of the dust off his tunic. Even though this corridor was abandoned, he could hear the clamor of people gathering to attend the feast in the main hallway. He walked at a clipped pace as he made his way in the opposite direction.

He reached his chambers, and found his mother waiting for him. Her white hair was coifed and pinned on the top of her head. Her dress was truly decadent. The skirts trailed behind her for a good five feet. Velvet with a silk bodice—the blue dress almost matched her eyes. Her face was painted, but he could still see her age creeping in. A small, hard line on each side of her mouth, and a permanent wrinkle in her forehead from all her worrying. Even now she wrung her hands in her skirt.

When she saw him, she straightened up, and said, “Finally. You’re going to be late to the feast. Come, quickly now.”

Dareund was not surprised to see Une and her serving girls waiting with a silk tunic—red, his father’s favorite color. It had gold embroidery on the sleeves and around the neck.

“I’m sorry, mother,” Dareund said. His voice was muffled by the old tunic the servants pulled over his head.

“This feast is important, my son,” her smile looked thin on her lips, but she did reach out and squeeze his shoulder. But she withdrew her hand quickly. “Your father will pick the next First Son, and it could be you.”

Dareund felt sweat beading on his forehead. A twinge of fear tightened in his gut. “It could be someone else. Oran is a favorite as well.”

“Oran is a brute and a bully,” his mother said. She waved a hand in front of her as if clearing a bad smell from the air. “*You* are special. You are strong. But you lack ambition, my boy. Don’t you want me to be comfortable?”

Dareund knew if he was chosen as First Son, his mother would be elevated to Queen Mother. She would sit at his father’s right hand in all matters of state and share his bed more often than the other wives. Guilt pulled at him. He did want his mother to be comfortable, but he couldn’t shake his unwillingness. He wasn’t built for the politics of court. He was fine being one of the favored, lesser sons.

“Of course, mother. Forgive me.”

“Good. Now hurry. I must go. Your father will look for me,” she said. Her smile brightened a little. Her skirts swished across the floor, and she left the room—her walk had a quality to it that always made her look as if she were dancing from the waist down.

#

Dareund pulled the sleeves of the tunic down over his wrists. His untimely entrance would cause a stir. He lingered in the shadows on the threshold of the great hall, peering through the throngs of people to the elevated throne upon which his father sat. The throne itself was as imposing as the man who perched upon it. Solid gold, with a back that stretched up to support the beams of the ceiling, the throne was intricately carved to show shrieking souls caught in their golden purgatory. His mother stood

behind his father, her hands resting lightly on the back of his chair. She spotted Dareund lurking, tapped his father's shoulder and then pointed to their son.

Dareund straightened up just as his father's icy eyes fall on him. His father raised a closed fist into the air and silence fell on the entire hall. Every eye followed his father's to him. A crowd full of painted faces both familiar and not watched him stride across the hall and kneel before his father's table.

“My Lord, I mourn the passing of my elder brother, your First Son. Please accept my condolences.”

He kept his kept his forehead pressed to the cold stone floor until his father said, “Rise, my son, and join us.”

Dareund and his mother sat to the left of his father. On his right, his wives sat ranked by favor, and then their sons. Dareund recognized several of the other sons, though his father had produced a progeny too numerous to know them all by name. The most favored sat at the head of the room, at their father's table. The rest gathered at the nearest tables in the banquet hall. From there, his father's subjects sat arranged in order of their conquering.

The First Conquered once went by the name Glasdekein. Very few of them had survived the great battle for their valley. They sat at the smallest table in the hall. Behind them sat the Second Conquered, and so on until the very last row of tables, which sat empty. These seats were reserved for the only remaining kingdom not yet conquered: Eantol. When he was younger, Dareund had asked his mother why they left the empty table up on all occasions—why not set it up only after Eantol had fallen? She told him that his father left it up to remind himself that he was not truly invincible.

Dareund found it difficult to fathom his father as anything less than a god.

A group of young female slaves shrouded from head to toe in black materialized in the hall's vaulted entrance. Stretched out on an engraved stone slab between them, lay the dead First Son covered by a crimson mortcloth. One of the slaves stood at the forefront of the procession, her naked body painted with the blood of the deceased. She was the First Son's companion. Reverence ruled the hall silently as the slaves bore the body to the funerary pyre in the center of the hall.

The companion climbed atop the pyre, and blew handfuls of firedust onto the raised platform. She then helped the other slaves raise the body up as well. Every mourner rose, and the fire was lit, then stomped their feet in unison with the death chant. The High Queen, mother of the First Son wailed above the din.

The rawness of her sorrow stirred an ache in Dareund's chest. The match was struck, and great blue flames consumed both slave and First Son before they licked the vaulted ceiling. The fire seemed to suck the oxygen right out of Dareund's lungs, and he gasped. He looked around the room, but none other appeared to be having the same shortness of breath.

His father rose, holding the Scepter of Time in one hand and the Ring of Ages in the other. His fingers uncurled from around the ring, and the gold trinket fell into the flames. A plume of scarlet smoke engulfed the room, and laughter like the boom of thunder echoed within the very walls. Then his father reached into the flames, and retrieved the ring, which now glowed orange and angry in his palm.

He turned back to the table where his favored sons and wives sat. His face masked any emotion as his eyes drifted from one face to the next down the whole line.

Dareund wished to hide his weakness from his father, but found he could not look away. Their eyes met, and his father's lips curved slightly. He said, "Kneel before me, Dareund—firstborn of my favored companion."

Dareund's knees jerked, and he slid out of his chair. He hit the ground with a dull thud that broke the hypnotic silence of the hall.

"Do you swear fealty to me, your father, king, and God?"

"I do," Dareund mumbled, then swallowed and said louder, "I do, Sire."

"Do you swear to carry my name and line with honor and in accordance with my desires?"

"I do," Dareund repeated.

"Hold out your hand."

Dareund winced as his father slid the molten ring over his knuckles. The pain took him for a moment, and the room swam in his tears. He bowed his forehead to the ground as the rest of the world was far away. He heard his father saying, "From this time until the dust takes you, you shall be the First Son, my favored son and successor."

The people broke out into applause. The sound echoed as the world passed into darkness and he fell unconscious.

Chapter 4

Rorikund tilted his head back, let the cold drizzle slide across his cheeks and drip down his chin. Inside the small, one room hut his family—or at least, what was left of it—shared, his older sister Lyra was wailing. She always wailed, but the light induced an even more grating pitch to her voice. His father’s deep, low timbre harmonized with her cries. Rorik shivered.

At one time he might have felt some sympathy for his sister. After all, she didn’t *choose* to be favored. Rorik glanced through the rough window. His father’s hand stroked Lyra’s hair. Rorik returned his gaze to the heavens. His entire childhood was spent in a small, segregated dirt hovel that shared a common wall with the family home. The day his father allowed him to come into the home proper, Rorik was so happy. He had hugged his father for the first time in his life and then rushed to warm himself by the fire. All his life he had watched his family from the outside, and now he was finally going to be a part of it. But he was quickly disabused of that notion.

He had been crouched, palms held to the heat when his father’s fingers closed around his throat from behind. One moment he was upright, the next he was face down in the dirt, struggling against the weight of his father pressing down on him. He remembered crying out to Lyra for help—remembered the cold, distant look in her eyes as she watched. The dirt stung his eyes and stuck to his face where it mixed with his spittle. He’d cried out, saying, “*Apa!*”

But his plea lingered in the air unanswered when the sharp, all-consuming pain of penetration bored him in half. His father’s breath was heavy against the back of his

neck, and the weight of him pushed the breath out of Rorik more effectively than any chokehold could. He remembered the dispassionate, distant sound of his father telling him to be quiet. He'd said, "Stop sniveling *duha*. Do you think you are too good for the dirt?"

But the dirt didn't bother him. He envied the dirt. The dirt scattered when he breathed; it hardened under the pressure of a body unrelenting against it. He'd lived his whole life in the dirt. He imagined that instead of the dirt scattering, the blood and snot, the virile fluid, and the tears would gather the dirt to his body—that it would cover the raw parts of him exposed.

The pain broke him in a way he found difficult to explain.

Rorik took a deep whiff of the damp air. *Eirijal* would be upon them soon. His father had neglected to ready their shelter. Last season, the roof of their tree-hut had collapsed and both Greanna and Hylli caught fever that eventually killed them. Sometimes, Lyra claimed she had caught it as well, but she didn't have that pale, splotchy, crazy-eyed madness. Near the end, Hylli didn't recognize anyone and stopped speaking except to howl and grunt. They had to tie her to the trunk of a nearby tree when they slept. Her feral shrieks still haunted him on restless nights when he laid awake, numb and afraid.

Those nights he would recite the stories and legends Elbiendar used to tell him when they were younger—before she abandoned him. His favorite story was one Elbeda told often in their childhood: Galbennor and the Mena.

When Geon was old, and the people still carried magic and communed with the gods, a woman became pregnant with a healthy, strong boy. Every day she carried him,

she sang to him and before even seeing his face, she called his name Galbennor, for when she told him stories, he stirred in her belly and caused her joy.

When Ormand—younger brother of Allaenne, the all-mother, creator of Geon and all that on it grew or died—saw the great contentment of both creator and creation he was jealous. He saw that Allaenne's happiness with her creation softened the hardness in their father and this caused his jealousy became unbearable. So he left their firmament and went down among the inhabitants of Geon and he found the young mother. While she slept, he laid his hand on her belly and cursed her that she might never know any more joy. A black spot appeared on her belly, and this satisfied Ormand, who then snuck back into the heavens.

The young mother woke with dread on the day of her son's birth and passed before ever laying eyes on small Galbennor. Her husband lamented her death and was bitter whenever he looked upon the son. Villagers and father alike blamed Galbennor for the strange death of his mother, and when he reached the age of eight they cast him out from among them. So Galbennor lived apart from his own kind and learned the secrets of animals and the forest. While he possessed none of the formal magic recognized by the Mijudeen, he was powerful for his knowledge.

After many years in the forest, Galbennor longed to return to the place of his birth. He crept along hidden paths and watched the villagers about their mundane lives. One day he looked upon a fair woman from the village and felt a stirring for her. But when he stepped out of the shadows, his wild appearance and uncouth manners terrified her and she fled.

The villagers banded together and began to hunt for the wild man though they did not recognize him. Galbennor fled them through the forest, and to the top of the highest hill. Tears stained his face and he cursed the heavens that he should be so alone and so hated.

Now, for many centuries, Meranee slept, and the people only know her by the name Mena, which later became known as the moon. But this night she heard the lament and shook off her slumber. She unfurled in the sky and appeared before the man who cried so bitterly for a reckoning. He searched wide-eyed for an escape from her terrible bright light but could not remove his gaze from her. She asked him why he had any right to call upon the heavens as he did.

“Because I have been cursed from my birth for some fault so small I cannot name it,” He replied. He told her he wished only for the loneliness to end.

When Mena heard this, she laughed and asked him, “Don’t you know to whom you speak?”

He did not and said that her name meant nothing to him unless it could lift the darkness from his heart. Upon hearing this, Mena struck an accord with the young man. If she could make him forget his darkness by the time her sister rose in the sky, then he would go forth and never again curse the gods. But if she failed, and the darkness diminished him still, she would not attempt to turn him away from his desire to exist no more.

Mena knew no display of greater power than a story and so she endeavored to tell him her story. Her sister’s betrayal still grieved her terribly, and so she told him the story within a set of three different tales. And while each tale was populated by a

different cast and setting, each contained a kernel of the same truth, and thus each story was the same story as the one that came before and after.

Almost as soon as her third tale ended, the sky was tinged orange and her time was over. Galbennor looked into the sunrise and laughed, for he had indeed forgotten his pain. He turned to ask Mena for her name, but she had already faded to the dark corner of the heavens where she slept.

All through the night, Allaenne, Ormand and their father watched the congress of two who had as much cause to hate them as any, but who turned away from their wrath. Ormand confessed then to his father that he caused the blight on Galbennor's life. He requested and his father granted him permission to perform an act of penitence for his actions.

So Ormand begged his sister next for her forgiveness and this she withheld, aggrieved that her own family would so blindly work against her joy. She would later miss and love him most of all her siblings.

Ormand left her and went to Mena. He kissed her forehead and granted her his immortality. He would stay in the sky and light the world for the darker half of the day, and she would forever walk among men in one form or another as she saw fit.

Meranee was overjoyed and fell immediately from the heavens. On Geon she sought out Galbennor, longing for the bond they had shared that first night. And everywhere she walked, small, white flowers sprang from the ground and blossomed. One day, Galbennor saw her walking in the field and recognized her immediately despite her altered visage. They ran to each other, and no other reunion was so sweet. They

spent all of their days together, exchanging and cataloguing all the great tales of their times.

Rorik liked to imagine he carried their legacy for them now—he committed all the stories he heard to memory so that they lived still. He pretended that they were the weight in his footsteps.

A twig snapped, and the hair on the back of his neck raised.

“*Duja,*” His father said. A quick blow to the back of his head left Rorik stumbling and blurry-eyed. “You should be inside, preparing your sister’s dinner.”

Easy to say. Rorik wasn’t sure what to cook his sister; they had only a few half-rotted vegetables. He meant to be checking the traps for rabbits and other small forest vermin. But the light still mesmerized. Not his father—his irritability seemed to increase whenever the light fell on him. He would mutter in the old language, something about omens and curses.

“Hurry, boy. Do you want to lose your last sister?” His father ducked back into their home.

Rorik absolutely did not want to lose Lyra despite not having any affection for her. She was the only thing that distracted his father from tormenting him. Rorik shuffled through the forest wondering if the entirety of Geon was like this—stuck in sylvan shadows, uncertain and broken.

Thunder rolled across the clouds and lightening cracked the horizon. Rorik was relieved to find several rats wriggling in their trap. So they would eat today. He said a quick prayer of gratitude to the Allmother. A small part of him also prayed for strength. His right hand was nearly useless. His fingers were gnarled and curled in—no longer to

straighten or grip anything of substance. His father had a habit of stomping on his hand whenever he committed any trivial infraction.

“Sorry,” Rorik whispered as he snapped the first rat's neck, and then the second. His left hand did most of the intricate work of releasing the snare. He scooped the small beasts into the crook of his right arm and struggled to his feet.

The first drops of rain splattered on the forest floor and kissed his nose and cheekbones. In no time at all, rainwater would flood the entire valley. Rorik broke out in a lopsided jog. He grit his teeth against the pain that accompanied each step. By the time he reached their stoop, the water slipped around his ankles with a surprisingly strong current.

“You've taken too long,” His father said. Whenever he spoke to Rorik, thick grooved-lines encased his mouth as if he was made to contort his face with the displeasure of seeing his only son. “Because of you, we'll be made to beg for charity off our names. What shame!”

Rorik grit his teeth. Plenty of times, his father sent Lyra out to beg provisions for their small family; the real shame was that the prying eyes of neighbors would check his father's abuse. Rorik often reminded himself that his father was wrong to be so cruel, or else he wouldn't hide it from the other villagers. He didn't often believe that, despite telling himself. The hidden thing was really the bitter disappointment that Rorik had not turned out better, prettier—a girl like his sisters—able to bear children. At first Rorik wondered why his father penetrated him if that penetration could not achieve the intended effect of new life. He eventually decided that his father did so solely to cause him pain.

“Help me with Lyra,” His father said. Rorik dutifully slipped his shoulder under her arm. She dragged his feet between them, her head cast back so that the eerie starlight reflected off the rainwater on her throat and breasts. His father hushed her, while he just wished she would be less melodramatic and walk on her perfectly usable legs. He stifled the frustration, forcing his mind to look away.

The nearest neighbor lived only minutes away in good weather, but the journey took an inordinate amount of time and effort. Lightning danced across the sky and thunder growled in the earth below. His foot slipped and he fell into the mud, dragging Lyra with him.

“Get up,” their father said as he lifted them both. Rorik gave a small grateful prayer that Lyra stood between him and his father’s nimble fist. They struggled, a three-headed-six-legged-two-brained-beast against the elements.

Rorick felt his chest tighten as the tell-tale flicker of firelight appeared ahead. Their neighbor had built their home half on the ground, and half in the branches of a wide oak tree. Even if the home wasn’t in the tree, the floods still, wouldn’t have touched it. The home’s floor was a series of raised boards, not dirt, and the water ran under the wood freely.

His father knocked loudly on the wall and shouted someone’s name. Rorik barely heard him over the pounding in his ears. How many years had passed since he spoke to anyone outside his family? More than he could now count. A tall woman with severe cheekbones and loose greying-black curls answered, stuck her neck out into the rain. “Are you ill-possessed, Mallias? Bring those children inside at once.”

“My youngest has been sick, and we couldn’t get to safety quickly enough to escape the storm.” His father cast a dark look his direction. Rorik coughed weakly, which only drew the woman’s attention.

Her eyes narrowed and she lifted his chin to examine his bruised face in the light. “What’s happened to your face, little one?”

“He’s a clumsy child, adventurous, but clumsy. Unfortunately, born mute.”

Rorik shook his chin free from her fingers and averted his gaze so as not to betray his father’s lie.

“We may have some unction to heal the worst of the bruising,” she said. Cold dread collected in Rorik’s spine. This was going to be a long night.

Chapter 5

Before her seventh birthday, Wello was un-extraordinary in every way. But then the fever had taken her—changed her. The fabric of the universe whispered its secrets into her mind like a solemn lover. She saw the chronicles of time, ages of the world passing in the blink of an eye. And sometimes she could hear the heartbeat of Geon in the space between her breaths. And when everything was still, she could even hear the thoughts of those around her forming in their minds.

Shortly after the fever broke and she was changed, her people had banished her. Her father had packed their few belongings into a small wooden cart and they'd left the tribe for the northern territories. Her mother had stayed behind, unable to part from the way of her ancestors. Eight long years she and her father had roamed from village to village, ruins to caverns, never resting, never home.

Now Wello pushed dirt over the crumbling, burnt-white logs. The ashy pit matched the dry patches forming on her elbows and between her fingers. How long had it been since she bathed?

The smoke's last breath dissipated quickly into the crisp air. Away to the south, the valley burned. Two days ago, her father left to scout some wild game. He'd approached her when she was down at the base of the mountain cleaning the fish innards from her gutting knife; he patted her head and kissed her where her forehead met her hair.

"I'll be back soon." He took the silver flame pendant from his neck and slid it over her head. "Keep this safe for me."

"Ja," she said. She hadn't really been listening; this was their routine. When he would leave, he'd give her the necklace and she'd wear it until he returned. It was his

promise to never abandon her. The pendant was a little too large for her slender neck. The twine had been measured for a man, and it hung clear down to her navel. The well-wrought silver was flat on the side that touched her skin and rough on the other. She rubbed the callused bed of her thumb on the smooth side, and then pressed the rough edge to her lips. She was not naïve enough to think he was returning.

Upon that thought, Wello was filled with a sudden fierce desire to look her father in his dark eyes and nestle close to his side. She longed to hear his voice recant the legends of old. She wished to run her fingers through his dark grizzled hair and braid it down his back one more time. Words she'd never spoken aloud to him now felt like weight she'd carry with her until the end of her days.

Part of her wanted to remain perched on that ledge until the moment she joined him in death. Maybe his prey had injured him. Maybe he'd lost his way back. Maybe if she waited just a while longer. . . . But his stern command resounded in her mind, "Move on. If I'm able I will catch up, if not, you mustn't linger. To be still is to be dead."

He'd said this to her all her life, and yet she'd never imagined having to move on without him. She rubbed the back of her hand under her nose. She'd been still too long already. She turned away from the burning valley and hoisted her pack off the ground. For the better part of a fortnight, they'd made their way north from one abandoned village on the western edge of the known world. She now stood on the summit of one of the southernmost mountains in the Crook'd Spine range. In her despair, she wished to turn back, to search the plains for some tribe that would take her in as one of their own. But if . . . just *if* her father was not dead, he would never find her there. North.

A series of tunnels riddled The Spine. They were rumored to have been carved out of the ground by Derneil as she fought to be reunited with Kedner. Rumor also held that the lovers' ghosts still haunted the winding passageways. While she enjoyed the story and very nearly believed it, Wello'd traversed most of the tunnels and had yet to see any real haunting. But ghosts or no, the armies of the enemy rarely ventured underground. The troops that did often vanished within the earth. Wello's feet had crossed over some of the soldiers' boneyards—gleaming piles of denuded skeletons, partially scattered by scavenging animals. She felt the somber reverence the dead inspired whenever she came across these entombed remains. They would have sooner skewered her than had her pity, and yet she still felt it.

Thinking about her father's bones, left to rot, brought a strange tightness to her chest. She ducked under the cavern entrance to the tunnels. Her breaths echoed off the narrow, stony corridor's walls.

“Jáme fildeorn noah . . .” Wello muttered. The words—a prayer passed down from her people's ancestors—served as an elegy. Some of the tightness eased with each breath. She'd never been truly alone in her entire life. She reached out and braced herself on either wall of the passage.

“I am strong,” she told herself. “I am strong.”

She repeated the declaration until her voice rang true and authoritative in her ears. As her resolve formed, hard and certain, Wello felt the air in the passage shift. A cold draft moved through her. Ahead, a strange light burst from the darkness, blinding her. She could sense the world shifting, making room for an unexplained, unnatural occurrence. The cold seeped out of the air, vanquished by intense warmth, but the light

was not fire. Fire glowed unsteady and washed the world in a pale orange. This light was fixed—white, and so intense it swallowed up everything around it.

The white enveloped her. Had she not still felt the rough tunnel on either side, Wello would have believed herself transported somewhere else entirely. Materializing out of the pure light was a small clearing in dense woods. Wello removed her hands from the walls and found herself standing in the clearing. She closed her eyes; she'd often experienced dreams as real as any memory. This one was no exception.

The white light that had surrounded her dimmed in intensity, revealing a magnificent temple on the opposite side of the clearing. She'd traveled through villages where people lived in stationary, elaborate wooden homes . . . all paled in comparison with the temple. A gilt roof curled up away from the marble pillars bearing it and reached to the sky like a flower not yet in bloom. The building was so wide that it seemed to go on forever in her periphery.

Wello approached it hesitantly, reaching out to touch the smooth pale marble column before she stepped under the roof's shade. Ten paces ahead of her, a marble staircase led up to a set of heavy doors inlaid with a golden symbol—a woman who held a small orb in each of her hands as if to show them somehow equal. Wello took ahold of the curved edge of the symbol and pulled the doors open, splitting the woman down the middle. She stepped into a vaulted circular room with an oculus in the ceiling. Light filtered down to a floor tiled with mosaics in the shape of symbols that moved as Wello did. The walls, curtained in velvet, were lined with the corpses of women and men—old bones, white with age, denuded except for a few which bore the last remnants of decomposing robes and rusted armor.

She turned slowly as she approached the center of the room. Directly under the oculus, an altar was carved and lined with the same velvet as the walls. When she touched the edge of the altar, it swung across the floor, revealing a stone staircase that led down into the bowels of the earth.

Something invisible tugged at her navel, urging her to take the staircase to its conclusion. Wello sucked in a sharp breath and then began the descent. The air chilled and grew heavy as she approached the room at the bottom of the stairs. Compared with the room above, this chamber was simple. Shelves on the walls held numerous scrolls and books. A small desk sat against one wall, and a girl sat at the desk. Wello could see echoes of the girl's once vibrant life, now little more than a faint imprint. Her father said that when tragedy befell a particular place, often the dead would linger as custodians of the memory—to tell of the events, or warn away the living.

The girl turned and fixed Wello with a fierce glare. Her hair was fire, framing a pale face with depthless black eyes.

“Who are you?” she asked.

Although the strange girl spoke Wello's native tongue, she did so with a peculiar accent and a formality that had long since passed out of the language. Wello replied, “I am Wello, daughter of the nomad clan Igsahn. What is this place?”

The girl's head lilted to one side, her eyes narrowing. “Are you simple? This is *Mendalora*, Temple of the Light, maintained by the *Mijudein*. Do you trespass here?”

“No. This place called me to it, and begged my feet to walk this path.”

“Then you are one of us.”

“No. You are mistaken—the *Mijudein* were destroyed long before my birth day.”

The girl laughed, a sharp mocking noise. “You cannot destroy the *Mijudein*. Their power is the very essence of Geon. The air you breathe, the light you see, the water that courses in the ground are all alive with *miju*. As sure as I am the custodian, you are the Seer.”

“What do you mean?”

The girl stood and selected a sheath of bound parchments. “I am Fieran, and the one chosen to stand guard over the knowledge of the *Mijudein*. The Last Custodian. I have waited a long time for you.”

“I do not understand.”

“My temple was sacked during the Great Wars. All of my order were killed. I was last among them, and this is the volume which was entrusted to us to guard.”

“Why that one?” Wello asked.

The girl shrugged, her hand still resting atop the books leather binding. “When the dark one’s host encircled the temple, the mistress called me to her chamber. She handed me this book and said ‘go, hide yourself as best you can and defend this book with your blood if needs be.’ Her words carried a spell that have bound it to me this long time.”

“Aren’t you tired?”

“Yes,” Fieran said. She tilted her head to one side, a strange asymmetrical smile tugging at the corner of her lips. “I’ve been alone such a long time now. I wish to join my sisters in the Allmother’s grace.”

“Surely you can go,” Wello replied, “it’s been ages since anyone could understand the ancient markings.”

“I cannot go until another claims my responsibility as her own.”

“You mean me,” Wello said, drawing away from the girl’s outstretched hand. To possess any book—much less one of such importance—would make her a target for the rest of her days. Her people and ir Drogkarnor’s army were suspicious of any person caught with an ancient artifact.

“You must swear to protect it with all your power—to die rather than let it fall into our enemy’s hands.”

“But no can even read these symbols anymore. That knowledge has been long lost.”

“Have you looked into the great void of time? Do you know what the future of our world holds?” Fieran’s voice rang with power and anger, but her eyes implored Wello to accept.

“No.” Wello felt a dry, panicked scratch at the back of her throat. The book did seem to call to her the same way her the temple had drawn her in. Unlike her village and her mother, her father always maintained that her fever had been a blessing from the Allmother—that she was called to perform some great deed. A little voice inside her told her *yes*. What if she refused this task and the world remained forevermore in darkness?

Reaching for the book, Wello said, “I swear.”

“Then you have released me from my duty. And my spirit will rest with my kin.” Already the fiery hue of Fieran’s hair was fading, and the flush of her cheeks paled. “Do not fail me.”

Fieran sank into the chair and spoke no more. Wello touched her shoulder reassuringly, but the flesh-and-blood girl of a moment before was now merely cold, hard bone. The magic that had held the clutches of time at bay was now unraveled. The

ground groaned under Wello, and the ceiling sprinkled dust and small rocks on them as the walls began to shake.

Wello scooped the leather-bound volume to her chest. Searing pain melded her flesh with the leather, and she heard the voices of bygone generations in the air around her. A pillar of ghostly light shot into the heavens, taking her breath with it. A star pulsed in the night sky, fortified by the beam. Wello gasped, her knuckles strained and arched, trying to peel themselves away from the burning book. But her strength availed her no reprieve. The light ebbed back down, binding her hand to the book as a healer would wrap a wound. Then it sank into her skin and disappeared entirely.

A harsh gale rushing down from above pushed her back. She fell hard and her vision blurred. The world was on fire, crumbling into ruins around her. She rolled onto her knees and crawled to the stairs. Above her she heard the lament of the dead raised in an awful chorus. She curled into a ball at the edge of the stairs, her knees pressing the spine of the book against her breast, and closed her eyes tightly.

“I am strong,” she whispered.

#

Wello woke up slowly, fighting off the groggy clutches of slumber. Pain pierced her skull with such intensity it dotted her vision when she first opened her eyes. She blinked away the spots and groaned. For a few breaths she held her forehead in her hands. The pain gradually ebbed until it was merely a dull throb behind her eyes.

She wasn't in the tunnels anymore. She was laying in the underbrush of a forest. The book. She sat up, her eyes searching all around her for the book. It lay partially buried under her. She tugged it free and brushed the dirt from its cover. Her hand—the

one that melded to the leather—had a foreign marking not unlike the ones that lined the parchment bound between the leather. She held it up. The marking was pale, silver, almost like a scar except it moved as she wiggled her fingers. The line twisted and crossed itself several times between her wrist and pointer finger. The glow against her dark skin echoed the now winking light in the night sky.

“A curse,” she said to herself, ripping a strip from her underskirts and wrapping it around the hand. She quickly tucked her frazzled hair back into a knot and clamored to her feet. She needed to be quit of this place, for now the pale light marked it.

Chapter 6

Elbeda was curled up on her side, wishing she didn't miss Beaumont's warmth. Twice she moved to roll over, to search out his arms—his embrace. But always her hands found the cold stone and dirt. So she lay awake, listening to every shift and grumble of the stones in the dark. Each time the sound broke the stillness Elbeda flinched, sure that *this* time the sound was not the wildlife, or the movement of geon, but soldiers coming to drag her back to the dank dungeons of Scianne's inner keep.

She thought back on the soldiers at the gate, the one with beady eyes who wanted to bed her before letting her go. The fear that had flared up. She knew she'd only be lucky enough to escape that kind of attention once. She remembered how scary it had been the first time Beaumont told her to lay down on the bed. She'd always known his protection would not be free. Even though he'd been gentle, she'd bled on the furs, and been sore. Each time got easier, but she never really enjoyed it. She enjoyed the quiet moments, when his work distracted him. She never told him no, but she knew if she had, he would have listened.

Elbeda wiped away the wetness on her cheek. She didn't want to think about Beaumont, or the soldiers, or her father. They were all tied together in a ball of confusion and pain and sex. She just wanted to be free from her own body. She still found it difficult to imagine there soon being enough room for an entirely new being under her skin. Would she feel crowded when her bump began to show? Her mother had never spoken of her pregnancies. Elbeda only vaguely remembered her two younger siblings' births. Lyra had been a difficult pregnancy, and Elbeda remembered how her mother's screams shook the hut when she gave birth. Rorik's had been different, not as

long or painful, if her mother's calls were any indication. Her mother also visited the healer less, and took less potions during the birthing process. The idea of that much pain was frightening.

She was still thinking about her new condition when a strange, soft light lifted some of the darkness and deepened the shadows of the cavern's gut. Elbeda raised herself up, twisting around to face the cave's mouth. She gasped. Over the horizon, a small ball of light pierced the black sky. She blinked several times, awed at how the sky no longer felt like a slab of oppressive darkness pushing down on her from above. The new light gave it a new dimension. So much space she hadn't been able to judge.

She crawled across the dirt—half-dragging her cloak behind her—until the light fell directly on her face. She looked around. Under the inky sky, she'd never noticed the slight variations in color of stones, trees. Even her skin looked different—luminescent. As if she were a firebug, glowing from the inside. But then she'd be warm, at least she thought she would. She didn't see how a being could be made in flames and not burn with the same intensity. For a moment she imagined a fire burning inside the cavern of her chest, lapping at the space between her ribs, spreading down her limbs. Was there enough room in her belly for both fire and baby? What if the fire couldn't be contained by her skin? Elbeda shook the silliness from her mind and rubbed at the ingrained dirt around her nail bed.

“Star.” The word felt like an invocation rolling off her lips. She didn't like to think about the time she shared with Rorik as a child. The memories always tasted bittersweet, and she felt the guilt of abandoning him more with each year she stayed gone. If she were sitting with him now, she might have told him a story. She didn't

really fully believe in the legends and gods—she knew how easily the teller could change the story being told. She'd embellished enough myths for Rorik. She'd done it out of kindness, but perhaps kindness was an enemy of the truth. She'd lied after all.

None of the stories she'd been told explained how the stars joined the Mena in the sky. Still, she had told Rorik they were the Mena's tears, caught in the blanket of the sky. Elbeda wasn't sure why she told him that. She had imagined the Mena was lonely, upset at the fate her sister had forced upon her, and so it made sense she'd cried. But why her tears were stars and not rain made little objective sense.

She wondered if Beaumont could see the light too. She had never told him any stories. Would he have a word for it? Elbeda knew it was more likely he had missed it's birth. His nose was always to the wheel. No doubt one of the neighbors would have had to rouse him from his work before he would notice the light. Guilt niggled at her. By now, he knew she was gone, and probably knew she'd never to return. Maybe he was disappointed too, but she imagined he was still sitting at his wheel, whistling. Did he wish her well, or had she broken the kind part of him? The thought struck her hard, and she had to sit for a moment with it.

Since she had missed her flow, she'd fought the urge to feel her stomach for some magical, external sign of the extra life she carried. She gave in now, her hands searching and finding the smooth rounded flesh between her knobby hipbones. She knew the surplus of skin she thought she felt was really only deemed extra because of her new knowledge of motherhood. In reality, she was the same size for the last three years. Still face tilted up to the light, Elbeda held the loose skin and began to imagine how she would

explain the world she'd known her whole life to a child who'd grow up in an entirely different one.

#

Rorik knew the nomenclature for the light immediately upon seeing it in the sky: *star*. Elbeda had told him how the Mena was betrayed by her sister and fixed in the sky to light the part of day then called night. Elbeda said, the Mena's tears were suspended in the sky—effulgent—as all things were which had been touched by the gods. The reason, she said, was because earthly things with celestial grace were of both planes and therefore caught between the two—unable to fully ascend, but no longer suited to the human realm. But the Mena's tears, the stars must have been more made of the gods than not, Rorik reasoned, for they fled the sky when the land was cursed, and all things theistic withdrew from their world. Sometimes Rorik placed his memory of Elbeda in the same sacrosanct category: once here, now distant, hopefully to return again.

In light of the emerged star, the idea that Elbeda might come back for him even all these years later did seem more plausible than it had even the last time he'd wished for it. He tried to picture her now, as an adult. She probably looked like their mother, tall and sturdy, with long dark hair worn in a braid for efficiency. But he imagined her happier. She had to be happier now that she was free of their father.

His father shifted in his sleep and reminded Rorik he was not alone with his thoughts. Even asleep, the other's presence intruded on the solemnity of the moment. Right now, they shared a secret knowledge—him and the star. A slow, uncomfortable expression tugged at his cheeks. *Smile*. He touched his own face to feel the shape of it.

Scarred, uneven. He ran his crooked fingers over his dry peeling lips and up to his hairline.

He looked over at Lyra and Vasialla, snuggled under Vasialla's furs in the far corner. In the new light he could see how peaceful they looked when asleep. He hated Lyra a little less when she wasn't commanding everyone's attention. His father slept on the floor, next to the spot Rorik should have been laying in. But he didn't sleep easily anymore. How could they? They existed unawares that the first star had reemerged in the firmament. Songs had been sung already of this moment. Hopes and lives had been tied up in the belief that this would happen. They were now living in a time that would be immortalized in the stories future generations told.

Rorik found it suddenly impossible to imagine a dim future. He saw a place for himself far away, in a great rebuilt city. With Sorea's curse lifted, he'd be able to read, and inscribe the oral legends passed down through generations. Perhaps he would compile stories and histories beyond those he knew. He could picture himself amidst a group of children—white-haired *mijua*, sky-skinned *Eldrein*, the tawny, dark-haired Sciannese mixed together—teaching them the stories about how the world was formed and the histories of their ancestors.

He tore his face away from the sky and searched the bare-walled home. No written artifacts sat among Vasialla's odds and ends. Rorik had a sudden urge to test whether the curse would lift immediately, or unravel slowly. He'd only looked at a book once, when his mother's family visited. Her sister was a handmaid to the *Adumadorn* and she had been carrying a book back to The Collective. She let all the children hold it.

Rorik remembered how surprisingly weighty the tome had been in his hands. The pages smelled weird, and were rough between his fingertips. The yellowed corners stuck together, and Rorik had to lick his fingers and rub the pages together to separate them. Even a brief glance at the spindly text pressed hot needling pain behind his eyes. The symbols swirled and transposed across the page in a jumble of ink. Would he be able to lay them out straight, hold them flat and immovable in his mind now that the curse was lifting? Or would it take years to learn the ancient script, one letter, one word at a time? Rorik decided it didn't matter; either way he would learn to read and then to write.

So many stories lived inside him. Rorik sat transfixed, eyes gleaming in the nascent light, imagining which one he would write first.

#

Rans rolled from his side to his back on the narrow cot. Reena re-nestled into the crook of his arm without waking. He never understood how she could sleep through Giaben's racket. Rans knew it wasn't Giaben's fault that he was plagued by night terror. His friend had suffered from these fever dreams for as long as Rans had known him.

Not only was Giaben moaning and uttering unintelligible strings of words, but the camp was unusually bright and loud as well. Rans laid his arm over his face, hoping to reduce the light seeping in through the canvas tent's opening. But no sooner had he found the comfortable groove in the crook of his arm than someone shook the tent.

"Get up men," one of the older soldiers said with an urgent growl to his tenor. "There's rioting from the citadel to the Gutter."

Rans sat up quickly. Last time there was a riot in The Gutter, half the city burned. Gutter Rats opposing the endless war organized themselves, and armed with rocks and

torches, marched through the streets. Some among them spoke in broken Eantoli phrases—these ones had been publicly executed after the violence was ended. But Rans still remembered how many dirty men and women gathered in the fiery streets that night. So many so, that they outnumbered the soldiers. This happened before his first real battle—before he'd been bathed in the blood of fleeing, pleading, sobbing Eantolean villagers. Before the chaos of swords rending flesh, a horde of angry Gutter Rats looked every bit as dangerous as an army.

Reena startled awake. She flopped onto her back, staring up at him through disheveled dark curls. He loved the way her hair tangled in her lashes for the briefest moment before she swept it back into a well-practiced knot. She said in a sleep-thickened voice, “What’s going on?”

“I’m not sure,” Rans said. “Wake Giaben.”

Rans climbed out of bed and into his uniform. His hands shook with every tightened lace and every scratch of metal on metal. Reena was whispering something in Giaben’s ear and he was just stirring when Rans stepped out of the tent.

The ground was strangely lit. A ghostly pale light more constant than fire, but less fierce, engulfed the entire camp. Rans glanced up into the face of another, younger soldier. The ashen boy—face upturned to the sky—held perfectly round disks of light within his iris.

Rans turned. Above the horizon—impossibly far away—a ball of light hung suspended in the sky. Rans felt his weight sink to his feet, until he felt rooted to the ground, unable to escape that unknown, unknowable object. The rush of soldiers creating wind as they passed him added to the chilling effect of the light. Did anyone know what

it was, and why it's light was cast so far? How had someone gotten the ball of fire all the way up in the sky? Giaben liked to ridicule him for not thinking about the grander, deeper things in life, but Rans hated the not knowing.

Suddenly he felt incredibly small. His mind carried him back to a long-ago discarded memory from his youth. Him—barely old enough to wield a dagger—watching two of the veterans fight in the training pit. He couldn't remember much more than that still image, and the feeling that he would never attain their level of expertise. He imagined them progressing endlessly, never fainting or tiring, aging or dying, always beyond his reach.

That same feeling crept into Rans's gut now. His fingers felt for the familiar curve of his pommel. The cold metal pressed his palm, kept him from losing his grip on the terrestrial—the mundane. Fighting in The Gutter seemed insubstantial, but it, too, grounded him. He could help with the rioting. He fathomed the violence of a mob more completely than he could fathom the ways in which this light might change their world.

#

The sweet tones of his mother-tongue coaxed Giaben gently from his uneasy sleep. The words reached through the dream pitch and calmed the panic he couldn't abate when sleeping. He blinked awake. Even though he knew logically, Rans didn't speak any Eantoli, he had imagined it was him that whispered in Giaben's ear, bringing him back to the present. But it was Reena bent over his cot, just low enough that her hair brushed against his cheek as she straightened up. "Rans said to wake you."

"Why? What's happened," Giaben asked. He knew some of his disappointment leaked into his voice, but Reena only shrugged. He supposed she couldn't tell the

difference between when he struggled to suppress his desires versus his naturally gruff demeanor.

She was already back to Rans's cot, organizing the mess he left behind. She smoothed out the furs and collected his tunic and trousers that were balled up at the foot of the cot. "He didn't say."

She didn't meet his eyes—a trait he knew meant she was afraid. She feigned nonchalance well. He could only spot the tremor of uncertainty underneath the calm of her face because he recognized a little of himself in her. Not the shared ancestry he alone knew about, but the need to always react with the least amount personal investment. To mimic those around them in exchange for a modicum of safety.

"I better get out there."

"You're going to need your armor," Reena said, pointing towards his sword belt. Her voice remained even. Giaben admired that. Sometimes he understood why Rans loved her. Rans hadn't shut up for a good fortnight after the first time he saw her in the camp. They were only boys then, and Giaben never even thought to look at the gussied up girls the older men entertained. Girls were soft and strange. But Rans spoke of her physical attributes as if she were the Mother Goddess in a mortal skin. And Giaben supposed she was pretty, even if she didn't interest him that way. But what he liked about her was her strength in quiet moments, when no one else was watching her.

His armor went on quickly, ill-fastened in his haste. He fumbled with his arm-guard as he plunged out the tent's mouth. Rans stood a few paces from their tent, his armor gleaming silver in the night. Beyond him, a star marred the night scape. A star.

Giaben's breath caught in that impossible place between the his lungs and his nose. Blood pumped furiously.

Although he had forgotten most of his childhood before his mother's death, he knew the legend. Stars would return to the sky and spell the doom of *ir Drogkarnor's* reign over Geon. The dread burst. He laughed and his laughter shook Rans out of his trance.

His voice had a hard edge even though Giaben saw a fraction of his own wonder reflected in his friend's eyes. "All of Scianne is rioting, and you're laughing."

Of course the people of Scianne were rioting. For centuries they'd reveled in the darkness, secure with their faith in the Lord Dictate. An undying mage was akin to a deity for the godless. These people no longer understood that the magic came from the goddess—was literally a piece of her divinity living in them—and couldn't be separated from her. No matter how the Lord Dictate dressed it up, or hid it away, his magic too was owed to *her*. They rioted because they didn't comprehend anything beyond their immediate existence. No ties bound them to the stories of their ancestors, long-before conquered by the Lord Dictate.

"C'mon," Rans said.

Giaben jogged to catch up with Rans, who had already begun stalking towards the rank and file of men in the fields just outside the encampment. Even as he hurried to catch his friend, he threw a look over his shoulder at the star. The star pinned the sky, buoying the darkness around it. A word came to him—old and unused: hope.

Chapter 7

Elbeda's childhood practice came back with surprising immediacy—crossing every body of moving water, covering the evidence of her footfalls, burying her waste, etc. Even now, outside the territory most overrun with *ir Drogkarnor's* soldiers and spies, she had eschewed to light a candle or sleep in the open. She'd planned to trade one in *Gueb weshula*—a market colloquially called Demon's Door by travelers—but perhaps she would trade them both, along with a few of her other trinkets. Her boots were more suited to the city, and already she'd walked holes into parts of the soles. Plus, a crossbow, or more likely, extra food wouldn't hurt either.

Since the star had appeared, time seemed easier to track. Not in quarters, like the city, but rather halves. Half the night was lit by that lonely light—the other marked with the darkness, although the darkness felt less impregnable the farther she drew from the city. Elbeda preferred to sleep the light half of the night, and moved in the dark night. She called them in the fashion of her mother tongue, *loranot* and *karn'ot* respectively. She faced parts of her journey where *Eantoli* would be the only spoken tongue, a challenge considering she hadn't spoken the language in a near-decade. So she spent her journey plucking bits of the language from her memory and putting them back together as best she could.

She was no poet or bard, but she was pleased with her progress when she came across the tableau. The small pile of bones smelled faintly of one of the aromatic spices—one that her family had cooked with when she was a child, but one which she had not used since her arrival in Scianne. She'd taken a deep whiff and it stuck in her nostrils. The animal—something small like a squirrel or chipmunk—was laid out with the largest

skull bone above the rest of the body. Elbeda remembered this meant it was safe to approach the market today. There were no known patrols in the area, and there had been no raids on them in a while. If the skull had been placed below the animal's pelvis, she would have had to alter her route to avoid trouble.

The market had scouts they sent out to set up these tableaux to warn travelers off. She'd heard it said the tableaux were updated daily, and maintained by a slew of these scouts who slipped through the shadows. As a child, Elbeda had imagined it a romanticized job, daring to tarry in *ir Drogkarnor's* domain, spying on his secrets. She no longer imagined it to be quite so adventurous, constantly roving around, moving through bordertowns and wilderness alike with no port in sight. She estimated she'd been on the road less than a week and already she longed for a regular place and familiar people to return to at the end of the day.

Elbeda straightened up from the tableau and wet her lips. She gave a low, warbling whistle to alert the *radlen* of her approach. No doubt they'd already seen her crouching among their handiwork. No movement disturbed the peace of the forest to betray their posts. Yet Elbeda felt the weight of their gaze as she continued along the path.

The trees thinned, and about a hundred feet out, the ground gave way to a steep cliffside. Elbeda couldn't see the sharp decline in the darkness, but she knew it was there. She'd been to *Gueb weshula* before. Even if she hadn't, the market had a waykeeper whose whole job was to welcome people to the market or dissuade them from their path before they plummeted to their death. She shuffled forward carefully, testing the ground by sliding her feet one in front of the other.

A hunched old woman with a young, barrel-chested man appeared out of the darkness carrying a lantern. The freshly lit beacon barely reached far enough from its cast-iron cage to light their faces. The woman's pupils were barely distinguishable from the whites of her eyes in the weak light. The young man's, however, were beady enough for the both of them, and held fast to Elbeda.

"Beware the edge, miss," the young man said. "My mother nearly met her death."

Elbeda looked from one to the other. She supposed the ruse would fool some, although the two did not look at all alike, except in grim expression. "I know of the edge, and I seek entrance to *Guebweshula*."

They spoke Sciannese, except for her naming of the marketplace. This was the test. Those who did not know the market's name would not be able to pass through its yawning door. At least, rumor told of an ancient curse laid on the cavern by the first travelers to seek refuge there. To keep out soldiers and spies, the cavern entrance would only allow those in who spoke its name in the mother-tongue. If one who did not speak its name first tried to enter, the earthen mouth of the cavern was said to close down on them, burying them alive. The magic apparently held even centuries after their deaths, although Elbeda thought it was more likely that she'd get run through by a sword than eaten by the magicked entrance to a cavern market.

"Have you brought an offering?"

Elbeda pulled the ribbon from the end of her braid and presented it to the crone. "I have little wealth and a long journey. If it pleases the gods, accept this ribbon as a token of my devotion."

The young man looked at the ribbon with a contemptuously curled lip, but the crone nodded once. Her nod was followed by the young man making a series of chirps. The top rungs of a ladder appeared at the lip of the cliff. Elbeda passed the strange pair and climbed down the ladder.

The entrance to the cavern was near halfway down the face of the cliff. The rocky surface jutted out just far enough for a man to stand holding the ladder on either side, and Elbeda to step onto the landing between them. One of the men turned the ladder sideways, and she pulled the vegetation that concealed the door aside and entered. When she was far enough down the tunnel, she heard them sliding the ladder back into the corridor behind her.

The tunnel was near black until the second sharp bend, when suddenly, a mirage like light glittered ahead of her. She followed the pale glow until the tunnel opened up into the market proper. The cavern floor was nearly as big as Scianne's citadel, with a ceiling looming so high it was nearly indistinguishable from the black recess it sat in. This was only the first of five such caverns interlinked via tunnel that comprised the market. The market was lit with giant fires in bowls placed equidistantly around the circumference of the cavern. She did not know how the fires remained lit without giving off smoke. The fires of Scianne were always belching their grey plumes into the heavens, but these fires crackled on without the slightest trace. Elbeda wondered if somebody here knew of a secret fuel that had this effect, or perhaps somebody had a fire-affinity. Nobody really did magic anymore—that knowledge was lost with the light—but she'd heard of people born with slight gifts for mundane things like charming animals, or drawing wealth to themselves. Her people didn't have a word for these people as a

grouping although sometimes the gifted were called by the Collective to serve their *Adumadorn*.

The market packed vendors and merchants, peddlers, travelers together in a crush of bodies. Every which way Elbeda moved, people pushed against each other. The air was thick with voices haggling, each one vying for dominance through volume or tone, so that the entire place sounded like an angry *ámama* scolding her grandchildren. Elbeda passed by a young girl deftly hemming the heavy woolen skirts. Her mother stood not two feet away, shouting the virtues of her girl's work to a family who had stopped for longer than a second to watch the girls work.

Elbeda was jostled along by a group of excitable young men who eagerly pressed towards an exhibit of finely sharpened axes. They immediately picked the biggest and began the delicate process of arguing the vendor—a large woman with thickly muscled arms and pecs rather than breasts—down in her estimation of their worth. Elbeda took advantage of their excitement, and gingerly lifted the smallest of the axes. The weapon was ungainly and heavy to her. She didn't really know anything about the proper weighting of an axe, and decided to stick with a weapon more easily manipulated. She set the axe back down and joined the stream of customer's once more.

Three stalls cordoned off by ropes tied around a series of boulder each hawked various fragrant foods. The last of the three also offered to place the poison or potion of fortune of choice on the food for a small additional fee. Most of the people gathered tight around this one's area, holding up various valuables they offered in exchange. The other two vendors watched—one with distaste, the other with jealousy.

A hush fell over the crowd and Elbeda looked up sharply. A pink-cheeked young woman walked barefoot through the crowd, which parted before her. She carried a sleeping baby in her arms, and a smile on her face. Elbeda forgot herself a moment, and crept closer to the edge of spectators. The baby was bundled away from sight, and the young mother hummed to the child. Elbeda resisted the urge to reach out and pull the blanket back from the child's face, embrace it as if it were at once her own child, and a stranger's. In a way, her people's barrenness made the community feel as if every child born was born to all.

Elbeda turned to watch the mother as she walked away. Business slowly resumed, but the tones were more subdued, and people seemed altogether more agreeable. The spell of respite didn't last long. Sooner an old healer lady with grey hair piled in a knot on her head was moving counter to the stream of traffic, shouting, "Get it here! The elixir guaranteed to bring child to the difficult womb! You have all borne witness to the miracle of life, do you deny it?"

The girl who was sewing the skirt's hem looked up at her mother, who shook her head, and went back to working. But several other young women turned and began following the healer back to her wares.

Elbeda remained transfixed a spell longer than the others. She felt the dizzying realization that people would soon look at her the way they did that other young mother—would move from before her path—ask her to bless their daughters as if pregnancy were contagious, and her mere presence would pass it.

She slipped into the next passage way and marveled that the clamor and smell didn't follow her here. Perhaps the rumors of magic had some truth to them. She hurried

down the tunnel, flattening herself to the wall in order to let others pass her as they met in the passing. They murmured thanks that got swallowed up in the silence. She tilted her head in acknowledgment; for some reason to speak felt transgressive.

Soon she reached the second cavern. There were much fewer customers here. The flashy vendors, or the ones peddling rarities or kitschy wares generally stuck to the first cavern and drew those looking for novelty. The second and third chambers were dedicated to the necessities of traveling, and the fourth and fifth were places for scholars, healers, and tradesmen to gather and rest. Elbeda figured her needs would be met in this or the next cavern.

She moved to the side, next to one of the fire bowls and produced her candles, a length of silk Beaumont bought for her. She was much too practical to make a dress from it. But the seafoam was a desirable color for her complexion and the gift had been a thoughtful one. The only item of value she did not intend to trade was the ceramic ring she wore a thin twine around her neck. This she tucked out of view in the bodice of her dress. The smooth ceramic edge of the ring leached the warmth from her skin, although at first its cold seared her.

With her meager trades in tow she rejoined the leisurely flux of people milling through the wide lanes.

#

After much haggling and stress, Elbeda managed to trade her silk for two, one-square-foot swatches of leather, thread, a needle, and a sack of salted meat. The candles she traded for a length of rope and some oil to rub down her shoes with to keep the wet

from seeping through. She wasn't very good at arguing, and thought she probably out to have gotten more for items, but she was pleased with what she had, and more pleased still that the trading was over.

The only item she didn't acquire was a bow. An old woman at the last stall in the third cavern had offered to trade her a bow in exchange for a significant portion of her hair, but Elbeda was disinclined. She knew gifted people could work little magics from personal items such as spit and hair and nails, and she wanted no part in any magic used for evil. And she had no ability to discern one type of magic from another.

She entered the fourth cavern and tarried in the wide space. As long as she did not intend to sleep, she could mill about here as long as she pleased. She watched a caravan near her as they packed up their things. Five men, and three women who bore no relation to each other except proximity. Two young men seemed to be paired off together in romance or perhaps, kindred friendship, while an older man and woman sat close to each other, quibbling over who would carry which items. The other four people in the group were silent as they collected belongings.

Elbeda hovered near the edge of their grouping, hoping they might invite her to join them—or that she might find courage to ask to join them. She blamed the isolation she endured as a young child for her temerity in engaging unfamiliar people. The back and forth of small-talk escaped her with its nuances and innuendos. So much meaning seemed to pass between words.

“Move off,” a tall man with eyes that didn't quite point the same direction and an auburn crop of hair said as his shoulder caught hers. Elbeda rubbed her arm but didn't apologize, even though the words touched the tip of her tongue. The man turned back to

look her over, an unsettling smile on his lips. Not dangerous, but also not friendly. One of those expressions that, like the meaning between words, Elbeda didn't quite grasp. "You looking for company?"

Elbeda felt a hot blush creeping up her neck and into her cheeks. "No. I am looking for a troupe to join for safety on the road."

The man's head tilted to the side, and his smile widened. "Where are you going?"

"Devri." Elbeda left it at that. She needn't tell him the whole of her journey.

Being in Demon's Door lent the man some trust, but only a modicum.

"My troupe is headed that direction. We're set out to find the collective, to pay homage to the new *Adumadorn*."

"New *Adumadorn*?" Elbeda repeated. She'd only met the old *Adumadorn* once as a child. The woman had traveled to the village to urge the people to join the Collective, bolster the community against *ir Drogkarnor's* attacks. She'd been middle-aged then, with fine lines around her eyes and mouth—but she possessed an aura of power and serenity that emanated wherever she went. Elbeda hoped that the grieving period would be over by the time she reached the Collective. She had no offering, but news of her child would be well met.

He gave her a curious look. "Yes, the Long Death took her. Where have you been?"

"I've been in the Bordertowns," Elbeda lied. People would look at her skeptically enough if they heard she was in the Bordertowns. But if they knew she'd lived in the heart of their enemy's territory, she'd likely be shunned or exiled.

"Come meet the others."

Elbeda followed the ginger-headed man through the smattering of people. She couldn't see the harm in at least meeting the troupe, even if this one unsettled her a little. Perhaps because she was so used to the taciturn Beaumont, all the smiling was uncomfortable.

The troupe he spoke of consisted of three other men. The one she met was the youngest of the bunch—probably only a few years older than herself. He greeted the men with a low wave of the hand. The men all craned their necks to see her. She wanted to shrink back, but held herself still and tried to smile.

The ginger-headed one spoke, saying: “She is journeying to Devri, and seeks companions for the trip. I figured we’re going near enough.”

“Do you have a name?” One of the other men spoke. He was thick through the belly and wore his tunic loose. He had greyed hair, and his eyes had a focused intensity to them.

“I’m Elbiendar. But my friends may call me Elbeda,” she said.

“Elbeda. I’m Ulndur,” he motioned to the man next to him, “This is Drehn.”

Drehn was younger—his dark hair was just starting to grey. He wore a short beard, and a big sword. He smiled at her when Ulndur said his name.

“And this one is called Barfromme,” Ulndur gave a nod of the head towards the man on the other side of Drehn. Barfromme looked old not because of age lines or the grey in his hair, but rather because he looked life-weary. He hunched over, and his face and arms bore battle scars. “You’ve already met Peglerri.”

Elbeda glanced at the ginger-headed man. He was already studying her, and grinned when their eyes met. She said, “I have.”

“Can you hunt?”

“I’m a decent shot with a bow, if you have a spare. But I do well enough with snares and my knife.”

“How’s your cooking,” UIndur asked. The other men leaned forward.

Elbeda said, “I cook. Nothing fancy, but it’s edible.”

“Excellent. Peglerri’s been cooking for us, and he’s got no skill.”

“Hey,” Peglerri interjected.

“You said so yourself,” UIndur said without missing a beat, then turned back to Elbeda, “Welcome to our humble troupe.”

Elbeda looked at each of the men, and nodded. She sat down near them and began packing her new items into her sack. She left the leather, sewing accoutrement, and oil out to fix her shoes. She wasn’t sure how she felt about her new companions, but she was relieved to have found a group willing to take on a stranger with only meager skills to offer in exchange.

Chapter 8

A loud sound jerked Beaumont from his sleep. His hands searched the furs for a moment before he remembered Elbeda had gone. He swallowed the lump of anger and grief. Something was happening outside. People were shouting and clamoring in the street. Beaumont stood and approached the door.

Someone he couldn't see shouted, "It is our doom. The end is come."

Cold dread trickled down Beaumont's spine as he saw the cause for their upset. In the inky canvas of their sky, a ball of wavering light hung. The man who had shouted spoke true. Other people flooded the streets, and Beaumont staggered out to join them. But the crowd soon began shoving and jostling each other.

Behind him, a woman said, "every man for himself."

Beaumont felt suddenly purposeless. What good was his skill at the wheel if the world was about die? What good was his loyalty to their Lord Dictate if this was the time when his powers failed them? He had no answers, so when another man swung at him, Beaumont ducked and hit the man in the gut. The pain traveled up into his wrist but he hit him again.

He heard something shatter and he looked to his shop. A group of young men were throwing his glazed pots at the ground. The distraction cost him. The man struck the side of his face, and Beaumont stumbled backwards. He shook his head clear and shouted, "Get out of my shop."

But it was useless. One youth laughed and pushed another pot from the shelf.

Beaumont turned around just in time to catch a kick to the kneecap. He crumpled.

A woman stood atop the houses. She was all fury, and when she bellowed her voice cut through the chaos. “Stop fighting. We must petition our Lord Dictate. We must march on the castle.”

A few people mumbled agreement. Most threw small rocks and pieces of wood or glass at her. But the man Beaumont had been fighting was one who nodded. Beaumont slipped away, limping on his smarting knee. He was too old for fisticuffs in the street. He thought of Elbeda. He wondered where she had gone, and why she had left in the night rather than talk to him about it. That was the part that hurt. She wouldn't have gone home except under duress. He knew a small bit of the abuse she had experienced and knew she wouldn't go willingly. He wished now that she had asked him to go with her. He would have agreed. With the omen of doom in the sky, his only regret was that the world would end before he saw her again.

A flash of light in the gutter pulled his gaze to it. They had toppled one of the pillars and fire spilled across the land. Other people saw it too, and panic overtook wit. That quickly the crowd turned to a mob. Beaumont found a narrow passage between homes, and sat on a large rock. He hoped he could sit out the rest of the violence—perhaps the rest of his life—on this rock.

#

Rioting seemed too weak a word to describe the Gutter upon Rans's arrival. The first thing he noticed was a man in a tattered greying robe standing atop an uneven, overturned crate. The man's face was covered haphazardly in strips removed from his robe's cloth. Red seeped from beneath the edges. His eyes—nerve clusters still intact—were lifted to the night sky, one in each hand. In front of him, a small group had gathered.

Two or three older women sang a dirge to cover up the screams of those plucking out their own eyes with heated spoons. A child called for his father somewhere unseen.

A group of young men had gathered at the base of one of the pillars which held the fireduct aloft, and took turns striking the base with great stone hammers. Commander Jos motioned for several soldiers to stop the men. But too late. The stone shifted, and the channel groaned as it tilted to the earth. Oil and flames flared angry orange against the sky. The heat was immediate and overwhelming. Even a few hundred paces away, Rans raised his hand to cover his eyes. The armor that normally kept the worst of the cold at bay now sweltered.

Rans kept time, marching in sync with Giaben. A quick glance. Giaben's face was stony, and distant. Rans knew better than to trust the facade. The night terrors would be unbearable for weeks to come.

A woman ran out of the flames, blackened and howling, like a creature straight from the hereafter. One of the soldiers thrust his blade clean through her. Giaben winced. The blow was a mercy.

Commander Jos said, "Rans, Giaben—collect the children and take them to the citadel orphanage until the violence passes."

Rans saluted and the two of them broke into a jog. Rans instinctively headed in the opposite direction of Giaben. He knew without asking they would collect children and meet at the orphanage when they could find more children.

The Gutter's loose constellation of huts made of straw, daub and waddle burned in quick succession and the Scianne's poor flooded out into the dirt street. Rans scooped up a child in each arm. One—a little girl—clung to him, squishing her doll between her

head and his chest. The other child kicked and flailed so much Rans had to heft him over his shoulder.

An old woman with a blue sash ran into Rans, her shrill voice proclaiming the ending of their nation. “The light will doom us all!”

Rans almost tripped trying to circumvent her. Several people crawled, awkwardly one-handed, and shielded their eyes with the other. Rans understood a little. His eyes watered from the new light and he had an unexplainable urge to seek out the shadows. He stepped over and around them with high knees.

The soldiers guarding the high stone gate to the citadel waved him through. The orphanage was a small structure on the outer edge of the city. Giaben said once that the city was designed to hide the undesirable and ugly from aristocratic gaze. Rans didn’t really understand. But he usually had a hard time following Giaben’s logic when he talked about politics and government.

Two women dressed in simply grey robes took the two children without speaking. The light refracted in their eyes caught their fear. Rans felt an uncomfortable urge to reassure them. He said, “The high Lord keeps us all. There is nothing to fear.”

Both nodded and ushered the children back inside. Rans turned. He passed Giaben on his way back to the Gutter. Giaben had one girl on his back, and carried a little boy on one side, and had three more all holding hands and clustered near his side. He was signing softly. Rans met his eyes but didn’t interrupt the song.

He’d seen this side of his friend before. The one that was soft, and able to reach through people’s panic and fear. He didn’t have that skill, and resorted to physical

intimidation to get results. But there was a special quality to the way Giaben could connect with people that made Rans ache.

#

Rans flopped down on the stairs across from the orphanage and slid his helmet off. He wiped at the sweat dripping from the ends of his hair. The other soldiers had dug trench lines around the fire, and the Gutter was now cleared out. A small grouping of parents crowded the orphanage entrance, their voices clamoring for their children.

He tilted his head back against the pillar and closed his eyes. He let the darkness anchor him.

“Long day,” Giaben said. He groaned as he sat down beside Rans.

Rans didn’t have to respond as he accepted a swig of water from Giaben’s canteen. The cool water burned as it passed through his throat.

“210.”

“What?” Rans asked.

“210 people dead.”

Rans’s brow furrowed. “Why are you telling me this?”

“No reason,” Giaben said with a shrug.

“Then don’t,” Rans said. Giaben frustrated him to no ends when he got like this. They’d done their duty to the Lord Dictate and Scianne. Why couldn’t Giaben count the children they’d saved instead of the men, women, and children they hadn’t? “Can’t we just relax.”

“Of course,” Giaben said. His eyes searched the sky and caught the starlight. “It’s strange how something so small and far away can cause so much devastation.”

Rans followed his gaze, but looked away quickly to avoid being ensorcelled again. “People have a right to be scared, don’t you think?”

“Are you scared?” Giaben asked.

“No,” Rans snapped too quickly. He glanced again at the star. He hated the uncertainty that accompanied the star. He wondered if others would appear—dotting the sky until the darkness was blotted out. Just looking at the star made his eyes water. If the entire sky was littered with stars wouldn’t the light be blinding?

Yet, Giaben sat calmly under the light’s spell, untroubled by unknown consequences. Sometimes, like now, Rans felt his friend a stranger. He couldn’t gage his thoughts, or understand his expressions. He was reminded of the first few months after meeting Giaben as a child. Jos had given him the task of befriending and training Giaben. But as child, Giaben wouldn’t speak to or look at him. He was sick a lot, and healing from a bad beating. Rans visited him every day after drills and other duties for nearly half a year before Giaben acknowledged him for the first time. They never talked about those times, and Rans felt the same pattern held. Him waiting—Giaben withholding.

Rans stood up, holding his barbute in the crook of his arm. He held out a hand to help Giaben up. “Let’s get back to camp. I want to check on Reena.”

Chapter 9

Dareund woke slowly. Shadows moving around him had that strange, languid dreamlike quality to them. He looked down his chest and saw his bandaged right hand and knew the ceremony hadn't been a nightmare. He was First Son. Him. A weight settled in his chest and gut. He blinked a few times, then stared up at the canopy hanging across the bedposts. He wasn't in his room.

"He's awake," one of the maidservants said. The ethereal figures floating around his periphery gathered around the edges of his bed. Three young women, Une, and his Mother—he saw them now. The sleepy fog lifted from his mind. They all had the same expression of concern. Dareund propped himself up to his elbows.

"It's just my hand," he said. The women looked anywhere but his face; Une and his mother exchanged a glance that carried a message he couldn't quite decipher. His gut twisted. "What are you not telling me?"

"Your father, our Lord Dictate, has requested your presence in his chambers upon your awakening," his mother replied. She carried a strange tension in her lips; it pulled her normal pout into a harsh, thin line.

Dareund stretched his burned hand out in front of him. Red-tinged gauze swaddled the finger. He could feel the ache of the burn deep in his bones. The thought of seeing his father leech the warmth out of him and left him feeling exhausted. "I shouldn't keep him waiting."

"Une has prepared your raiment."

His mother turned in a graceful arch, her skirts brushing her ankles. Dareund was sure she practiced that walk. She glanced over one shoulder, giving him a smile that didn't touch her eyes, and then left.

Une beckoned two young chambermaids forward. They held a gold embroidered silk tunic aloft between them. The pale blue suited him, but Dareund personally preferred less ornate daywear. The third chambermaid presented a new crown on a plush red pillow. The gold was inlaid with obsidian stones that reflected the light in the room. Even sitting on the cushion, the crown weighed down on Dareund.

Une tugged a brush through his hair until it was fine and flat. Her aged fingers plated the strands and pulled it away from his face. The girls washed his feet and face and hands. He wondered, for the first time, who they were as people outside of this job. What did they hope for, fear? One of the girls looked briefly into his face and flushed. Dareund found it strange to think they found him intimidating or imposing. The last time they'd dressed him, he'd been just another prince. But the solemnity in the room told him the carefree yesterday was gone for good.

When Dareund was dressed, he stood before the mirror in awe. The person reflected resembled him not at all. The white powdered face watched him with grimness, icy blue eyes sharp and mouth twisted downward. The crown dwarfed the natural curvature of his head and reached toward the ceiling making him look much taller than he actually was. Older, more tired.

"You look regal," Une told him. Her eyes gleamed wet in the firelight, and her smile held the memory of having cared for him all his life. She squeezed his shoulder and

then gave him a gentle push towards the door. Two soldiers fell into step behind him. He'd be picking his own guard out soon. Just one of many new responsibilities.

#

Oran laid in wait in the hallway. He materialized as soon as Dareund was free of his mother and servants. When Dareund saw him, he stopped. The older boy swept a mocking hand across his waist and bowed low. "My lord."

"Stop it Oran." Dareund said.

Oran straightened himself. His eyes had a hard glint, unmasked hatred—but something else too. Was it fear? Oran said, "You know he only picked you because you look like that *whore*."

"My mother is not a whore," Dareund said.

He didn't allow himself to take a step back as Oran leaned closer until their noses almost touched. "Not that whore—the whore-witch that has doomed us."

"Wh-what?" Dareund asked. The way Oran articulated the last few words carried a meaning Dareund didn't understand.

Oran pulled back, his face a smirk. "You don't know."

He laughed so deeply his whole body shook. If Oran was pleased with something, Dareund had cause to be frightened. Oran was a true prince of Scianne—cruel, harsh, and strong.

"What don't I know?"

"Oh *hipschet*," Oran said, still laughing as he spoke, "I'd hate to be you."

Dareund began to edge his way around Oran. He kept his back pressed to the way as he sidled by. He said, "Don't you have better things to do?"

The other boy's hands curled into fists at his side. Baiting him was so easy it approached boring. Dareund knew Oran would never risk striking the First Son, no matter how mad he got. The punishment would be the loss of his hand and his father's favor. Oran was too ambitious to suffer either. He'd bide his time, and any attack on his part would come from the shadows if it came at all.

"Don't you?" Oran said.

"Yes, our Lord Dictate awaits me, so go away," Dareund said.

Oran turned, but as he walked away, he spoke just loud enough for Dareund to hear him. "I'm almost glad he chose you."

#

His father's chambers took up most of the upper two floors of the palace. The chambers he often used when meeting guests were directly across from where the stone staircase opened up to the corridor. On either side of the door stood a member of the crimson guard. They followed him with their eyes as he approached but didn't move. Had he been perceived as a threat, Dareund had no doubt they would have relieved him of his head before he could reach for the sword strapped to his hip.

Instead, they parted and one pushed the heavy oak door open. His father's chamber was like an entirely different, living creature compared to the corridor. Fire ran along the base of the stone walls, washing the room in an amber hue compare to the dim grey hall. Scrolls lined the high shelving built into the stone. So much knowledge lost.

His father stood on the other side of the chambers, next to an open window that yawned open from the floor to the ceiling. The heavy drapes were tied back with silk ropes, and beyond their vignette, Dareund saw something impossible.

His breath caught in his chest. In a distant corner of the heavens, a bright, crystalline light glimmered. Dareund took a few bold steps forward, joining his father before asking or receiving permission. His father didn't appear to notice. His black eyes held the light steady in their irises.

“What is it called?” Dareund asked. “Is it the sun?”

Legends spoke of a flame that once burned across the entire sky, lighting half of the day.

“No. A star.” His father's uncharacteristically soft voice unsettled fear in Dareund's gut.

A star. Stars were also spoken of in the stories passed down from both his mother's and his father's oral histories. His mother's stories spoke of stars as symbols of hope; When the sister lights in the sky—the Mena and the Suta—finally made peace, their tears of joy were suspended as stars in the firmament to remind people that after tribulation comes great joy. His father's stories spoke of stars with more dread—of fallen kingdoms and realms in chaos. “What does it mean?”

“It means change. When that witch, Sorea, cursed the land, she told me that when the first light reappeared in the sky, it would mean my doom.”

Dareund felt a sudden, inappropriate urge to laugh. His father's doom? The entire idea seemed preposterous and yet here he stood, in his father's stern presence, being asked to seriously consider the possibility. He said, “Surely if it is done with magic, it can be undone with the same.”

“The spell was written in sacrificial blood. Not just anyone’s blood, but her own blood. Raw power will never be enough to unwrite it. Perhaps if we still had access to the ancient texts and grimoires”

Here, in the intimacy of his private chambers, the Lord Dictate wore the centuries of life that it did not when he made public appearances. His milky skin didn’t hang loose as it was wont to do on other old people, but it looked thinner, pulled more tightly across his bones with each passing year. And his face was smooth and hard, like an aged stone statue leached of its color. Dareund imagined the next few centuries would complete his father’s transformation to stone, hard and immovable.

The Lord Dictate turned to the nearest bookshelf and selected a tome. His tapered fingers flicked through the pages in a way that bespoke of his ability to read once upon a time. Dareund had only held a book once, and it had been clunky and awkward in his hands. The thin pages too delicate to turn without concentrated effort. Even in Kendau’s hand, the book had seemed out of place. The lesson that day was on Sorea’s curse. Kendau wanted them to experience the reading sickness first hand. Most of his brothers had gotten dizzy after a few moments of glancing over the tight lines of symbols. A few soldiered on and ended up puking and shaking for the rest of the day. One brother refused to give up and ended up going blind for near a fortnight.

Dareund supposed being a *hipschet* affected the way the curse worked on him. Other’s spoke of the symbols swimming and transposing as they tried to puzzle them out. Although it gave him a bad headache, Dareund found that if he concentrated hard enough he could hold them still in his mind. And rather than nausea, Dareund felt a rush of excitement that had stayed with him to this day.

So when Dareund took the volume from his father, he felt that familiar rush. His veins pulsing hard against his skin. The chill air biting his lungs. His shaking hands. The weight of the book being impossibly heavy for its compact size. Dareund figured this was the closest thing to magic he'd ever feel.

His father was speaking to him still, he realized.

“ . . . contain power beyond reckoning. Scrying and the testing of our prisoners have proven fruitless endeavors. But mine—and your predecessor's—recent victories on the battlefield have helped us narrow down the possible curse-breaker's location. He or she must be taking refuge with the Eantol Collective.”

Dareund pushed away the memory of Loab's funeral pyre and the fear that accompanied it. He would be expected to ride into battle at the head of troops now; although the idea of him, untested and shy of years, leading a host of grizzled veteran soldiers was laughable. He understood now what Oran meant with his parting jab. Death in battle was all glory in the songs, but better a different fool's death than his own.

Dareund looked down at the meticulously inked pages. The tome had fallen open to a page fully illustrated in colored inks; a woman sitting in the sky in conversation with a man standing on the brink of a cliff.

Dareund ran his fingers across the page, feeling the grooves left by the instruments used to illustrate and write. “You would like me to go find the curse-breaker?”

He'd understood his father's intent immediately, but needed the pause examining the illustration gave him to muster the courage to say so with a steady voice. Whoever

broke the curse would have access to worlds of knowledge long-forgotten, words with power untold.

His father fixed him with an approving expression Dareund assumed was intended to be a smile. “Yes, my First Son. If our kingdom is to survive, we must break the curse here, first. If the Eantol Collective gain this power, they will visit unimaginable horrors on us.”

Dareund bit back his urge to respond with a comment on the torments *their* kingdom had inflicted on the people of the Eantol Collective for the past three centuries. That would no doubt be considered akin to blasphemy, and he wasn’t looking to be the briefest seated First Son.

“I have a handful of military advisors who will council you. You’ll also need to select some personal guardsmen. You must trust these men with your life, so spend time with them and get to know them before choosing.” His father said all of this as if it were an everyday occurrence, and Dareund supposed it was to him. “We’ll be holding a banquet to accept tributes before you ride to battle. You should have your personal guard selected by then.”

“Yes my lord,” Dareund said. His bow was interrupted by a knock at the door. Out of the corner of his eye, he could make out Oran’s erect figure in the doorway.

“With your permission, I’ll take my leave.”

“I grant you this permission.”

His father summoned Oran forward. Dareund hesitated when Oran stepped into his path. His brother held his gaze with poorly concealed contempt in his eyes. He

muttered an accolade and bowed in mock respect. The Lord Dictate either did not notice, or did not correct Oran, so Dareund slid out of the chamber hot-faced and short of breath.

#

Dareund felt ridiculous in armor. Loab's armor had been specially made for him when he was already a grown man. Dareund was very much still a growing boy. The chainmail was too long, and his barbute clacked against the heavy hauberk. The chest plate dwarfed him and he still needed children's arm guards. Still, his mother insisted he could not meet with any of the army commanders unless he was in full regalia. So he click-clacked with every one of his stead's strides. The black stallion bucked and resisted his commands at every tug and heel. He missed Babu, his dappled grey mare. But the First Son couldn't show any sign of intimidation or weakness.

His whole body ached when he reached the encampment near the gate. The palace guards who accompanied him all wore the same aloof expression. He wondered how many First Son's they had lived through? How many had they protected? One of the men approached and offered to help Dareund down from the stallion. He waved the man off, hoping the scarlet wasn't creeping back into his neck and cheeks.

Five greying men awaited him. One stepped forward and said, "My Lord, we are honored that you have chosen to look among our ranks for members of your personal guard. Allow me to present myself, and the other commanders. I am Halvrik; these are Commanders Jos, Kilmeer, Darros, and Sylby."

Dareund nodded to each man as they bowed before him. All the bowing was a bit embarrassing and he hadn't figured out what he was supposed to do while people were

tripping all over themselves. “We will be working closely on the upcoming campaign. Right now, I’d like to tour the encampment.”

One of the palace guards took the reins to the stallion and Dareund joined the men. They all stood a head or two taller than him and didn’t make quite so much racket in their armor. One of the commander’s—Jos’s, he thought—eyes flickered between the light in the sky and the path they were walking. His expression as least grim, and that comforted Dareund. He decided to stay closest to this commander throughout the tour and positioned himself beside the man.

The encampment was laid out in very strict divisions. Each of the five commanders had a segment of the army divided out by age. The youngest soldiers performed most of the physical labor, Dareund learned. Boys much younger than him were building several small structures and clearing a ravine. His shoulders ached just watching the smallest boy heave a shovelful of dirt over his shoulder. The boy met his gaze and the hard, empty look in his eyes would haunt Dareund later, in solitary, comfortable moments.

The soldiers nearer to his age were keeping the prisoners and patrolling the more aristocratic areas of Scianne. Based on his experiences in the court, Dareund would rather have been digging out the ravine than dealing with the upper masses. The middle-aged men patrolled the gate leading to and from the city proper, as well as kept order in the Gutter. And most of the veterans still alive were on campaigns of order and occupation in the outlying territories and wild regions.

“A lot of the soldiers spend their free time here in camp, with the entertainment, or out hunting in the forest just beyond the gate,” Commander Jos explained. Dareund

guessed he meant whores when he said entertainment because swaths of vacuous woman in reveling clothing hung around the men and kept the ale and wines from running out. Most of the laughter and frivolity belonged to the men, but Dareund thought a couple of the women didn't look entirely miserable.

He felt guilty immediately upon thinking it. He remembered a time when he was young, sitting at his mother's feet, hearing tales of the world as she knew it in her childhood. The ugly, raised scar around her thigh made by the burning chain that marked all slaves. When he'd asked her what it was, and her expression soured, and her eyes got that glazed, distant glumness to them. He couldn't remember her answer, but he'd never forgotten the way her face arranged itself while she struggled to find the words to tell him she was enslaved to his father.

Each of these women, too, bore the branding of the slave. And while the men that pawed at them and pulled them closer may not have cared or noticed, Dareund was sure none of the woman would ever forget the trauma of that brand.

A sudden ruckus pulled Dareund's attention to another quarter of the camp. A group of soldiers were dragging a woman between them. Her face bore bruising and her body was bare. A man, also without clothing was wiping blood from a long cut across his cheek.

"One moment, my lord," one of the other commanders said. Dareund realized the man had been talking to him still, though his own mind wandered. Three of the commanders approached the men. One of the soldiers pushed the girl to her knees, gesticulating between her, and the wounded man. Another soldier handed the wounded man a sword.

The punishment was swift. The blade traced a thin, red line across the woman's throat twice and the excitement dissipated. Dareund couldn't tear his gaze away from her as she crumpled into herself and fell to the ground. Her own blood stained her cheek and chest, and her lifeless eyes stared at him—almost accursedly.

Dareund felt caught in the moment of her death, horrified with the quickness of the soldiers to return to their jovial pursuits. He searched their throngs, dismayed. Only one man, an older soldier, with a serious face and unusually fair hair seemed disturbed by the violence. This man, seated near a small grouping of other soldiers, frowned heavily, and his expression mirrored the uneasiness Dareund felt.

Chapter 10

Giaben looked up from his ale just in time to see the disturbance. A soldier he recognized but did not know by name, was hauling a camp whore out into the open. Her eyes roved over the encampment, bright with anger. Her teeth were clenched and her fingers clawed at the air, in search of someone to scratch. The soldier was bleeding, and Giaben could guess the rest. The girl must be new, full of fear and anger. She attacked the man when he tried to bed her, drawing blood. Her death would be imminent.

He lowered his gaze as the death blow was struck, and he remained navel-gazing for a moment as the soldiers returned to their lives. Rans muttered something compassionate to Reena, more to set her at ease rather than to clear his conscious. When Giaben steeled himself with an intentionally deep breath, he looked up. The young woman was dead in the dirt, her already red hair darkened with her own blood. He forced himself to look, despite his desire to go back to the tent and withdraw from the other men.

No matter how many women he killed or saw killed, they always reminded him of his mother. But Rans, and Reena, and the rest of the camp didn't know about her death. They thought the scars on his back were the result of raid executed by a band of disgruntled Eantolean border dwellers. Giaben felt a twinge of jealousy as in his periphery, he watched Reena wind her arm around Rans's neck and bury her face in his chest.

He thought about his friend's calloused hands scratching against his bare flesh—quick, hot breaths heavy with desire rattling between parted lips. He imagines Rans tasted

like wine and the fruit he often chose with his meals. Or maybe like sweat and musk, the way he smelled.

Giaben took a long swig of ale and held it in his mouth a moment. The flavor alone pressed against his panicky beating heart, and he knew the alcohol would only further settle his nerves. Giaben was taking another drink, eyes levied to the dead girl, when Rans and Reena stood abruptly.

Their haste pulled him back in, and he saw—for the first time in personal, intimate detail—the new First Son standing with Commander Jos in front of them. He, too, stood and made a salute, though his ale sloshed over the dirt when he did so. He searched for an adequate apology, but ended up stammering out a weak platitude. “Y-your grace, forgive me.”

The boy was even younger looking up close. His pale skin was smooth and untouched by war, weather, or wrinkles. He glanced at Commander Jos sidelong. After an uncomfortable moment, Giaben realized the boy had forgotten that *he* was the one being addressed. The boy tried to mask the error by nodding for the commander to leave.

“I wish to speak with you, alone.” The boy said. His eyes strayed to Rans and Reena. Rans bowed and hurried Reena off to another fire pit. His eyes were clear, bright blue that were startling even though rumors of *The Pale Prince* preceded them. When they returned to Giaben, he fought the urge to shift his weight from own foot to the other, like a guilty child. No doubt this boy was every bit as savage as his father.

“Your grace, what troubles you?” Giaben had already forgotten the new First Son’s name although he’d been at the burial ceremony.

“I . . . ,” he hesitated, then changed tact, “the woman’s death was unexpected.”

“Unexpected, my lord?” Giaben felt his brows raising, and although his survival instinct pricked, he continued on. “She drew the blood of one of your soldiers—by extension, she drew your blood. The man merely carried out the ascribed punishment provided by our Lord Dictate.”

“Yes.” The boy sounded unsure of himself. He glanced at the corpse, and Giaben wondered if he detected the hint of mockery in his tone. If Rans had heard him talk that way to the First Son, he’d likely die from the shame of association. Giaben was always voicing opinions that bothered his friend, even though he tried to not. “Seems a little harsh, death for a little scratch.”

Giaben’s mouth snapped closed—the snip in the quip he prepared quelled by the mourning in the boy’s voice. “Yes, my lord. Life can be harsh.”

Looking at the way the boy flushed, Giaben had a hard time imagining that this was the First Son, the new head of the Lord Dictate’s army, the one charged with carrying out marshal law. This boy would likely lead them all to their deaths with his inexperience.

Giaben prodded the uncommunicative teen. “Surely you don’t need me to pontificate on the nature of living.”

“I don’t want it to be harsh.”

The words came out impudent, like a toddler pouting some minuscule slight. Giaben almost asked the First Son his age, but thought better of that. Regardless of the actual number, Giaben would still feel unseasonably old in comparison. He’d fought in his first battle at age ten, and countless battles in the nearly two decades since. The

closest this prince had come to battle was determining how to punish errant servants. He was soft, as the privileged often were.

“What do you want—from *me*—your grace?”

“I need a personal guard,” the First Son said. The prince watched him for some acceptance or refusal, but Giaben could only blink stupidly. The very idea of him serving the son of a man he held responsible for the death of his family, and the destruction of his village felt blasphemous.

“I know several more experienced, better suited soldiers I could recommend for your grace’s pleasure.” Not a bold refusal, but a refusal none the less. He would never have dared it if the request was official—but out here, alone in the wooden enclave, bravery came easily.

“I saw the way you reacted when they killed that girl. I would have spared her if I could.”

“You were too late to spare her,” Giaben said. He masked the anger he felt, so his voice was merely disapproving. “We already stole her from her home, killed her loved ones, and brought her to the other side of the continent. What other ending could she have but to die, nameless and alone, among her enemies?”

The First Son recoiled, as if the words struck him physically. “You speak more directly than the courtiers and servants I am used to.”

“I apologize if it displeases your grace,” Giaben said through grit teeth, “I will do better to think on my words before I speak them.”

“No.” The First Son shook his head, knocking the thin golden band across his brow askew. “I wish more people spoke as you do.”

“I’m disagreeable, moody. Many soldiers don’t wish to work with me, and I prefer the small comforts of camp to the coldness of your palace.” Giaben hoped the truth would deflect the young prince from extending an official request. He wasn’t an ideologue, duty bound and prepared to die on a lord’s behalf.

He shot the prince a glance. The boy appeared to be deep in thought. When he spoke, his words came out slow as if he had picked each one out of infinite possibilities. “My mother is a woman much like the girl who was killed here tonight.”

Giaben tilted his head. He couldn’t keep track of the Lord Dictate’s wives anymore than he could the sons. But something about the way the prince spoke made the revelation feel as if it were a gift being offered to him.

“I was unaware.”

“She grew up by the sea, in a village she can no longer name under the threat of death.”

A scene flashed through Giaben’s mind. He was snuggled into his mother’s lap, smelling the briny ocean. Her voice was soft, lyrical as she traced shapes on his palms. She sang to him, her voice as soothing as the ebb and wave of the sea. He didn’t know if this actually happened, or if he merely composited the memory from partially remembered dreams. Just as quickly as it came, it faded.

Giaben wondered if the boy’s mother came from one of the villages near his, that certainly explained the boy’s fair complexion. Giaben’s people were known for their flaxen hair and sea-mist eyes—features the prince shared. Perhaps the prince was more clever than Giaben first thought.

The boy's tapered fingers tapped the side of his leg while he waited for Giaben to reply. Although he otherwise was still, those fingers betrayed him. The boy's name came back to him unbidden—Dareund. An Eantolean name derived from two words: *darneid* and *kund*. When spliced together, the name meant courageous one.

Maybe the name suited the boy. Giaben had certainly never found the courage to tell anyone else about his own mother—not even Rans. Giaben said, “I doubt your mother's death will be quite the same. She may not be born here, but through your father's marriage, and your birth, her name will be counted among the Sciannese when she passes.”

Dareund smiled ruefully. “That's a nice sentiment, but I don't think you fully understand the machinations of the court.”

Giaben's eyes narrowed as if concentration might help him root out the source of the boy's thinly veiled melancholia.

“You're right, your grace,” Giaben said. “Another reason I'm not the right pick to be your personal guard.”

He wished he sounded more resolved rather than unsure. But his voice wobbled, and he couldn't deny that even his resistance to the idea wavered. Perhaps it was the perceived kinship he recognized in the prince, or the sorrow in his voice when he spoke of the courts and his mother. Either way, Giaben didn't dislike the boy quite as much as he had when he first laid eyes on the ill-fitted armor.

Chapter 11

Elbeda sat on a large stone jutting out into the river, her feet dangling in the icy rapids. The water was runoff from melted snow, though it wasn't always so cold. They had a warmer season too, when despite the dark, the air heated the skin, and plants flourished. She was glad for the cold at the moment. Her feet were burning and blistered from the walking.

A few feet away, UIndur and Barfomme argued about the direction of travel. Elbeda glanced at them. She'd met them, and their two other companions in the Demon's Door market less than a fortnight earlier, and still wasn't wholly sure she trusted them. But traveling partners were hard to come by, and they were much better hunters than she. Peglerri sat near her, watching her with his wide-set beady eyes. He was the nearest to her age, but had yet to speak a single word to her. At the moment, his head tilted towards his left shoulder, and his smile had too many teeth. He was poking at fish in the dark recesses of the river, under the wide dark rim under the edge of the stone on which she sat. Every time he thrust the spear into the water, Elbeda had to clench her jaw to keep from flinching. Peglerri's grin widened each time he noticed.

"Do you catch anything that way?" She asked. The water was so dark, even when the star lit up the sky, she wouldn't have been able to see any fish.

Peglerri shrugged and their fourth companion, Drehn, said, "He *always* catches his prey. Give him time."

"Truly?" Elbeda said. She could feel her incredulity showing in a raised brow and wide-eyed expression. She didn't have that much time. She missed the chanting of the novice Clockmen keeping time for her. The city was never so quiet and lonely. Being

near the water wasn't so bad as when they were in the forest, and the only sound was the cicadas rubbing their wings. Even that stopped as they tread near.

They would be out of the forest soon enough. When the star lit the sky, she could make out the undulating ridge of the Crook'd Spine mountain range to their (south). Devri sat on the other side of the range, in a valley. The flooding season probably ravaged Devri now, on the side of the mountains that stormed for nearly a fortnight each year. Elbeda wondered if Old Schel still kept the time for the small village, or if she had passed in the eight years of Elbeda's absence.

UIndur approached the trio sitting on the river bank. He asked, "Are you ready to move out?"

Elbeda learned quickly in their first few days together that when UIndur asked a question, he was really issuing a command. Even though Barfemn was oldest, UIndur was the uncontested leader of the men. Elbeda quickly wrapped the freshly washed strips of fabric around the tender part of her feet before sliding them back into her leather boots. The forest ground hadn't completely destroyed the soles yet, but the Crook'd Spine waited with ragged crags anxious to do just that.

"Wait, Peglerri hasn't caught his fish," Elbeda said. All the men except UIndur laughed. Drehn's portly belly shook with each deep rumble. Barfemn's was more reserved—merely a chuckle. Peglerri's had a high, grating laugh almost painful to her ears.

"There will be more fish, *Elbakend*."

Elbeda gave a half-nod to acknowledge she heard. She hated being called *Elbakend*; she wasn't a child anymore—hadn't been for a long time. The secret, fierce

part of her wanted to give him a tongue-lashing that would discourage him from ever using the term again. But she knew her place with the men was precarious enough without a confrontation.

“Which path will we take?” Drehn asked.

Three paths existed from their river to the town of Devri: the *Treagorn* trail, the Bowel’s, or the traveler’s path that cut countless miles to the south and east to entirely circumvent the range. Elbeda knew from warnings and stories as a child that the first two were considered much more perilous than the last, most common path.

“We’ll be taking *Treagorn*.” Ulndur’s voice was flat—final. Barfremn’s mouth curved downward under his grey-shot beard. “It is the quickest, most direct way.”

“But what about *Klegen*?” Peglerri spoke for the first time, stealing the words from Elbeda’s mouth.

“They’re just rumors meant to scare children from straying too far from home,” Ulndur said.

Drehn glanced at Elbeda and caught her chewing her lip. He gave her a friendly punch to her shoulder. “Don’t worry, *Elbakund*, we’ll protect you.”

“I’m not worried.” Elbeda shoved him back. “I can take care of myself.”

She still hadn’t told the men of the small knife she kept tied to the underside of her skirt’s waistband. The same one she’d carried from Devri to Scianne as a child.

Drehn laughed again. “Of course you can.”

Elbeda made a face at him. Barfremn and Ulndur had started packing out. Elbeda took a few swift strides to catch up to them. Drehn kept astride her, leaving Peglerri trailing behind the small company. Elbeda looked over her shoulder at him.

He whistled under his breath, his eyes meeting hers. He winked and Elbeda quickly snapped her head back around to face the front.

#

Klegen were no laughing matter. Elbeda's village told the oral histories and myths about the creatures—once living people, warped by a spell that used their own life and body for the magic—for more generations than could be recounted at the beginning of the tale. Elbeda could only remember the names of her ancestors ten generations past who had passed the story down. She, herself had passed the story down to her younger brother years earlier. Elbeda blinked a few times to stop her eyes from watering. She doubted if Rorik remembered any of the stories; he'd been so young when she left. Just five, about to turn six.

Elbeda told the stories because they brought small comfort to her brother. She didn't really believe most of the legends, and regarded oral histories with a healthy dose of skepticism. If gods walked among them, and interfered in the lives of mortals, where were they now? Elbeda imagined the Allmother watching them with disinterest in the other realm, content to let her people be snuffed out as easy as candle in a drafty home. She couldn't quite bring herself to worship that deity.

But Rorik loved the stories—he hung on her words like she had been telling him a secret. Sometimes when she pretended to sleep, she heard him repeating the stories to himself over until he had them memorized better than she did. Elbeda shook her head. Guilt always accompanied thoughts of Rorik. Leaving him behind in that hovel, alone, cold and hungry . . .

“What are you thinking of, *Elbakund*?” Drehn asked.

He held out half a *paupai* to her, which she accepted with a smile. The fruit's sweet juice burst in her mouth. She said, "Nothing."

"Oh, you were making a face." Drehn scrunched up his large hooked nose into his wrinkled forehead. She slapped his arm. "Are you scared of being attacked by *Klegen*?"

"No," Elbeda said. A quick shudder ran through her limbs.

"They're not real, you know."

"I was thinking about my brother."

Elbeda absolutely *did not* know the *Klegen* weren't real. In fact, the older generation called Devri the village built on ruins. Twice the village was razed to the ground and rebuilt. The first second time was due to a plague that decimated the population. Rumors—because no one could rightly say which oral traditions were correct—spoke of the first razing at the dawn of *ir Drogkarnor's* reign, when he had not yet earned the name. They called him *karmijun* then. When the *Klegen* loosed on northern Eantol countryside, they devoured everything in their path. For over three years, people lived in fear of the creatures until gradually, they disappeared from the countryside. *Karmijun* claimed to have vanquished them with his magic. Most of her people believed he created them as a ploy to distract from his true mission: the overthrow of Eantol and the *Mijudein*.

"Oh, I didn't realize you had any family."

"Well," Elbeda said, "You only just met me."

Behind them, Peglerri laughed. His ginger hair tangled in front of his face, carried on the wind, masking his expression. But in his hands, he fiddled with his hunting knife.

Elbeda forced herself to calmly look back at Drehn. He, too, had glanced back at Peglerri, and was now gesturing for the other man to shut up. Drehn met her gaze with an apologetic grin. Elbeda matched the expression, but Peglerri continued to chuckle as they walked.

Chapter 12

The trees cast shadows across the forest ground—the same trees which had previously protected her in the darkness. Now the light pierced their boughs. The branches bowed away from the sturdy trunks as if to display their bounty to the heavens. The leaves were in full bloom, ensconcing the blossoms that clustered against the bark. Wind rattled the crop of acorns, producing a slow, melodic song.

Wello felt bare, exposed like a fresh wound. Under the makeshift bandages, her hands throbbed where they were marked. Her breath was ragged and her lungs burned. She'd run as far as she could but couldn't escape the light. Besides her harried breaths, the forest was silent. Even the beasts had the good sense to hide.

Wello braced herself on one of the trees, hoping to catch and quiet her breath. Catkins dragged over her shoulders and hair leaving behind some sticky yellow pollen. The ground beneath her feet felt atremble; she couldn't be sure whether it truly was, or her mind was tricking her. The edges of her vision dimmed and blurred. The feverish ache that always occurred when she slipped in and out of her visions pushed against the back of her eyes.

Around her, the forest was disintegrating, the particles rearranging themselves into something else—something foreign. A smooth stone floor covered by a high arching ceiling surrounded her. The rib-vaulted ridges in the ceiling were covered with gold leaf, high reliefs sprawled in the spaces in between.

The walls of the room seemed to be aflame. Yet she could see herself standing among the flames, untouched. A young man with white hair and pale eyes stood beside her. He held an open tome in one hand. With the other hand, he traced the lines of marks,

his mouth forming words in a language she couldn't understand. The words were harsh, full of tricky combinations of unlikely consonants. Sciannese.

When the pale man shut the book, he reached out for her hand. She pressed her hand into his. A strange emotion stirred in her gut. His hand was warm. The fire around them surged hotter and brighter, and then peeled away from the walls as if an invisible hand pulled a curtain aside.

Before them, a world took shape. The darkness which enveloped it, slowly crept away. Then the world was green, and flowers bloomed across the sphere. The pale man plucked one of the flowers and presented it to her in his palms. Honey dripped from its petals. Wello drank. The pale man then drank. He held her gaze even as he and the vision began to fade.

Like the hollow boom of the war drums, the distinct impression of truth and finality resounded in her chest. This was a part of her future. She clutched the book to her breast. The leather binding warmed her. The same premonition of danger which immediately followed the star's birth was rekindled.

She glanced around her. The forest was still and quiet again, firm. A large white oak stood before her. The girth and height of the tree surpassed any other in the area. Wello pressed her palm against it and felt its life, and it felt hers. They communed until they were familiar, like kindred friends. Wello saw the ages of the tree's life—the storm's it had weathered, the droughts it had endured, the family of woodland squirrels it had housed for generations.

Even as she stepped away, she felt an invisible tug in her navel and knew she'd always be able to find her way back to this tree. *Il'hibanya*, she called it—for it would be

a haven to her book. She crouched down and whispered to the tree's roots. They grew before her and broke through the hard ground. She offered them the book, and they accepted it, pulling it down with them into the earth once more. Leaning forward, she kissed the ground and murmured her thanks.

Craning her neck, she looked once more to the star, which was still nearly overhead. She whispered, "What doom have you brought on us all?"

She climbed into the embrace of the oak tree, and let the lullaby of its leaves sing her to sleep.

#

Wello woke abruptly and propped herself up among the tree's branches. The deep slumber lingered in her body, but she was certain she'd heard something. She held herself perfectly rigid. Cold sweat rolled down her forehead, and caused her dress to cling to her back.

Strong meaty fingers clamped down hard on her ankle. Wello screamed and clutched at the branches, but the man dragged her out of the tree. Branches scratched her arms and face on the way down. Panic seized her chest. Her lungs matched the harried beating of her heart.

She landed hard on her hands and knees. The man jerked her upright, his fingers squeezing her upper arm to the point of numbness. Despite the dread hardening in her gut, she pounded against his chest with her free hand.

"Let me go," Wello said. But she did not know their language, nor they hers. The soldier punched her mouth and she snarled in pain. He grabbed her jaw again, this

time wrenching it open. He shoved his hand down her throat until she was gagging. The one behind her was tying her wrists to each other, and then both to her waist.

The one who'd shoved his hand down her throat was the bigger of the two men; his hair was shaved so closely to his head that she could not accurately say what color it was. He had cold, dark eyes and the fire-mark—the brand of ir Drogkarnor's army—on each bicep. The veins in his throat pressed taut lines into his skin. He grabbed at her skirts, pulling her up hard against him.

The other soldier was more slight, and closer to her height, although he still stood a head taller than her. He said something in a harsh tone and his cruel companion shoved her away. She stumbled. Tears freely flowed down her face. The hard pit of anger had dissolved into terror. The two men bickered while she wept.

Whatever conclusion they reached, the soldier did not touch her like that again. Rather, they each looped a loose rope around her throat and stretched out the line between them such that she could not take more than one step in either direction without the constricting tug of the rope on her neck.

And so Wello's march south began. Her legs trembled under her weight, and fear wrenched her gut into a knot. The tears dried on her face, leaving her with only a headache to remind her that they happened. She'd never been touched by a man before—she'd never been around one long enough to entertain the idea really.

The soldier hadn't even penetrated her, yet pain lingered where he had touched her. When the other soldier wasn't looking, his eyes returned to her, wandering from her breast to her navel and back. Despite her clothes, she felt naked and powerless. He could do violence to her anytime he pleased and she would not have any recourse to stop him.

As she walked between their horses, Wello named each of them according to her fancy. The first, cruel one, she decided to call Meathead and the other she called Little Master for he seemed to be the higher ranking of the two.

When they had stopped and set up camp, the other soldier tied her to the base of a tree to sleep while they made camp and slept a short distance from her. But she dared not close her eyes. Instead she counted her tears—counted each a prayer to one of the gods and goddesses, kings and queens, or heroes of old. A prayer for strength.

The march to the city of Scianne began bleak and harsh. Wello stumbled forward, pulled along by the ropes about her waist and neck, at the soldiers' pace. At first she fought every step. But eventually, the rags on her feet loosened, then tore away in pieces until she was left barefoot. Every crag and bramble drew blood.

Neither soldier seemed to notice the fresh agony each step brought her. At least, not until small animals began plaguing their camps at night, drawn to the scent. One night, Wello was stirred from her restless slumber by a rough wet tongue between her toes. She found herself staring into the dark eyes of a forest fox. The animal's nose twitched. A patch of white fur ran from his nose, between his eyes, all the way up to his pointed ears. Wello tilted her head to the side, and the fox followed her.

“*Puskae*,” she whispered. The fox looked over his shoulder as if expecting company. When he looked back at her, he nudged her foot with his nose. She lifted her foot as much as her restraints allowed and ran her toes through its mangy coat. The fox bit her toes and she kicked it, her foot catching it under the jaw. It yipped and took a few steps back from her.

The yip startled one of the soldiers from his sleep. Little Master rolled over, bleary-eyed, to check on her. He leapt to his feet, fumbling for his sword. In the melee, Meathead awoke. He yelled something and the fox let out a blood-stirring yowl.

“Go, friend.” Wello urged the fox in a low, calm voice. He let out a whine, then darted off into the forest.

Little Master threw a rock after the fox. He was yelling. The other soldier was gesticulating towards Wello. Meathead lifted a partly burned branch out of the fire, and they approached her. They argued over her feet.

After they fought, Wello couldn't tell who had come up on top. Little Master loosed her bindings, while Meathead stalked off into the woods with his canteen. Wello wrestled with the soldier who had unknotted the ropes. He struck her with an open hand across her face. Taking a handful of her hair, he half dragged, half carried her to the fire.

When the soldier returned, his canteen sloshed. He washed her feet, and then rubbed something foul smelling on the wounds. They wrapped her feet with swathes of fabric from their packs. The following day, and every day after, Wello rode on one of the horses with the soldiers. They would take turns bearing her so as not to tire the horses.

Wello delighted in the reprieve, not least of all because she took small revenges on her captors—usually in the form of an *accidental* elbow or chin to the spine. They beat her when she did this, but the pain felt like victory.

Although they kept her much closer to the fire following her exchange with the fox, Wello thought she caught glimpses of the white fur and dark eyes in the shadows as they traveled.

When they emerged from the forest, and full light and majesty of Scianne was revealed, Wello fell to the ground. She'd never imagined this much light existed anywhere in the world. Large stone columns carried fire through the sky and encircled the city. Stone dwellings towered over the earth, jutting out from the mountainside in jagged lines.

Meathead pulled her back to her feet and thrust her forward. Wello fought him, twisting and grunting. Her eyes searched wildly for some dark spot to hide her. But the unnatural light seemed to touch everything she could see. Meathead snaked his arm around her chest, holding her tight to his body. She bucked hard, but Meathead marched her through the dirt and cobbled-stone street in front of him.

Dim eyes watched the soldiers jostle her down the road from behind cracked curtains and darkened eaves of their doors. A few of the more brave approached the side of the street to gaze at her in amazement. Their eyes wandered from the magically whitened tresses at her temple to her ragged hem, careful to avoid her eyes.

Little Master shouted at them, and when that didn't work, he swung the broad side of his sword at the nearest gawkers. He had little success as the peasants ducked away from his blade only to return to their staring. Wello tried to swallow but her throat was dry and swollen. She contemplated then what she had not allowed herself to think on as she trekked across the wilderness. She wondered how many of these men, women, and children would come to her death.

Children in Wello's youth had told many stories of what the enemy did to their prisoners. Almost all the stories ended in death. And the stories that didn't were worse by far. Every child was warned of ir Dragkarnor's power to bend wills and steal years with

his power. Wello shivered. Her hope was for a quick death—a hanging or beheading would suit her nicely. She'd even take to being burned rather than face being an empty-eyed, soulless *Kleg* until her flesh rotted from her bones.

Ahead of her on the road, a foothill rose from the valley, the nearest peak leading to the mountains above. Atop the peak, stood a fortress far beyond anything Wello had ever seen. Bigger than the tents of the elders, bigger than the caverns beneath the Crook'd Spine. From this monstrosity, an orange glow, a series of columns connected by thin lanes of fire, spread out into the valley. Wello was certain this would be the place of her doom.

Chapter 13

Rorik followed the woman into the small, curtained off corner of the home she used for the kitchen. Her name was Vasialla—namesake of the legendary messenger who created wind to carry messages from the Goddess to her people. She swayed to her own hum. Rorik liked the lilting rotation of her hips and shoulders; in his mind, he could melt away her years and capture a vignette of her youth. All rhythm and movement and story. She must have had many romances, for the deep grooves in the corner of her eyes held the joy of many smiles. And her eyes themselves were bottomless black oubliettes hiding secrets that naturally came with the passage of time. He wanted to ask her to tell him her story; he'd met so few people. But his father already told her he was mute, and Rorik indeed found his voice absent.

His father had deposited him and Lyra with Vasialla and returned home to see if he could salvage some of their belongings. And so Rorik found himself free of his father's shadow for the first time in several years.

He tried to fall in sync with their host as she moved about the space, preparing a meal. When she began clearing off the top of the small wooden table, he too collected things in his arms. A plain vase with long-dried lilies and orchids. A piece of a mirror worth more than the rest of her possessions put together. Some fragrant nettle and petals swathed in airy fabric. He laid them down beside her load and she grunted approvingly.

“You're filthy,” she said. “Wash your hands and then wash the tabletop with that rag.”

She gestured to a small pot of water with a worn cloth draped over the side. Rorik rolled up the ends of his tunic's sleeve until they hit his elbows. The water was cold as he

cupped handfuls over his arms and face. Delightfully cold. He'd almost forgotten the pale hue of his skin underneath the grime.

“Don't dally.”

He took the rag and rung it in the water. He made small circles across the table, rubbing at the contours of deep ruts in the surface. Vasialla bustled him out of the way. “That's enough. Put that in the basin and help me chop these vegetables.”

The vegetables were a generous heap of yellows, browns, and greens. More plentiful than Rorik could remember having in his life. His expression must have betrayed his thoughts, because she laid the knife next to the mound and said, “I grow them myself. Jevahn, used to help me. My husband. He's gone the way of the Goddess now.”

Rorik reached out to touch her arm, to comfort her. But his hand merely hovered between them a moment before it fell back to his side. He picked the knife up and separated out a few legumes. His fingers couldn't close around the knife, so he used the heel of his other hand to apply steady pressure against the vegetable.

Vasialla fluttered about around him—her speed and grace in sharp contrast to his methodical pace. She carved around the rotted part of a cut of meat and scraped the rest into the caldron. Even few breaths she glanced his direction, tracking his slow progress.

“What's wrong with your hands?” She tried stilling the knife and slid it out of his grip. She turned his hand over in her and tried to straighten out his crooked fingers. He pulled away from her. His blood thrummed loud and urgent. In this moment, he was relieved his father had taken his voice. Relieved too, that his father was not on the other side of the curtain, hovering over the exchange.

Her narrowed eyes mapped the bruises and scars on his forearms. “I’ll finish the chopping. You go to that shelf there and find the jar of *Chasma*.”

Chasma bloomed only along the riverbanks a fortnight’s walk from their village. When ground into a paste or salve it provided cool comfort and helped heal small injuries. Rorik knew what it smelled like because his father often rubbed it on Lyra’s temples when her head ached. Rorik shifted through the vials and jars until he found the one with the right sallow shade of ochre. He pulled it off the shelf and carried it to Vasialla. He hesitated before offering it to her. His father would be furious if he accepted this kindness from their neighbor. He hated being indebted to others.

“Give me the jar,” she said. She took the jar from him and uncorked the lid. The sweet, pungent smell of the blossom filled the room almost immediately. “Let me see your arm.”

She spread a small dollop over his left arm and then his right. The medicine tingled on his skin pleasantly. Under her breath, Vasialla muttered, “Clumsy my crooked back.”

Their eyes met and Rorik looked away.

“Are you even mute?”

Her question hung in the space between them. But what would he say? Vasialla squeezed his shoulder then resumed her preparations. “Fetch me those ceramic bowls. I only have two so we’ll have to eat in turns.”

Rorik’s stomach rumbled as if on cue. His cheeks reddened and the bowls clanked together in his hands. If Vasialla heard, she made no comment on it. She seemed to slink back into her own thoughts, and a tune was once again summoned to her lips. Rorik

wondered what it felt like to be free enough to dance. He longed to feel the music so deep in his being that he couldn't escape its beat.

Suddenly the tune ended, and she said, "We choose the path we walk."

Rorik thought of the legend of Oldred, who summoned three deities to the summit of the Crook'd Spine. *Klegen* scourged his people's lands and the Goddesses and Gods called upon him to fashion a weapon and take it the sea witch, Evallionne to bless. She laid a powerful spell—one-part enchantment, one-part curse. Whoever wielded the blade would be invincible in their chosen quest. But at the quest's conclusion, the blade would claim its price: the life of the wielder. Oldred faced the awful choice of leaving the woman he loved and sacrificing his village in order to save the realm or staying with his beloved and watching the world waste away. He chose the former, and he rid the land of the *klegen*. His sacrifice was honored by a year of mourning following his death and his tomb became the site of many pilgrimages.

Rorik's older sister Elbeda used to recount the legend to him in the safety of the dirt chamber they shared as children. Separated from the main house by a thin daub and wattle wall, the chamber felt like its own world. Elbeda was nearly six years older than him and knew all the best stories. She told him that for Oldred's *Aemn*, he climbed to the top of the Crook'd Spine and laid out an offering to Allaenne, the Mother Goddess. He brought her a lock of his beloved's hair, the first sword he forged in his apprenticeship, and a pot of spiced tea. And during the night—for this was back when they had a separation of day and night, light and dark—the Mother Goddess actually appeared before him in the visage of his dead mother.

She told him of the different paths he might walk in life. She told him of the children he would father if he remained with his beloved. She showed him a vision of the world falling into chaos and destruction. So closely were the images of his bringing life and death to the world joined that he couldn't distinguish joy from sorrow for all the things he saw come to pass in his vision. She then showed him a second path. In this future, Oldred left his beloved and took the blade he had forged to Evallionne. With the spelled sword he would wage war on the unnatural pestilence—the *klegen*—and drive them from the land. He would be a great hero, beloved by all. But when his task was done, he would return to find his village destroyed by the enemy he fought. He would grow old without finding love, but the land would flourish in peace for many generations.

But most importantly, she told him the path he walked was his alone to choose.

Oldred wept as he chose to leave his beloved and village to their fate. The Mother Goddess dried his tears with a gentle breeze. And then she gave him a gift. She summoned his mother's spirit from where it slept and crafted a body for it in the shape of a red fox. The fox would accompany him on his journey, and for all the days of his life.

The first time Elbeda told him the story, he had cried. To a child that seemed an awfully unfair choice. Elbeda smiled as she told him that life could not always reward good people with good. She said that the story's end was really a happy ending—after all, the Mother Goddess had returned a sweeter, greater love to Oldred than the one he was about to lose.

Rorick now conceded that Elbeda was right about the ending.

#

Vasialla swept the scraps of food on the dirt kitchen floor into the corner. The boy wiped the table down again and cleaned the knives. She remembered a time when she'd dreamed of her own children—before she carried her stillborn son to labor. When she held that small body in her arms, she marveled at the complexity of life. How could a child come into the world so perfectly formed—his hairless head sloping into a soft brow ridge and fatty cheeks, upturned nose and impossibly large eyes—but devoid of life? Jevahn had buried the boy under a tree not far from their small abode. She couldn't bear to think about him all alone, rotting under the ground, so she visited the woods often, singing to the trees and imagining them protecting her would-have-been child. Perhaps that was why she couldn't shake the feeling that this boy in her kitchen too needed protection.

He was all bones, sharp and angular. His dark eyes dwarfed his nose and thin-pressed lips—and seemed entirely too large for his face. He watched her with a far-off glimmer in his eyes. Vasialla was struck by how little he resembled either of his parents. She'd known his mother, Findaenne, from the time she was a small child to the time of her death. Finna had been pretty but more than a little shallow. She joined herself to the first handsome man who crossed her path. Vasialla had marveled that someone as blessed with beauty and a bountiful womb could be so unlucky in loving a man. She watched as Finna's beauty waned and her eyes grew hard and cruel.

Vasialla thought it almost impossible that the quiet, gentle boy belonged to Finna.

The girlchild's shrill moans carried into the kitchen. Their father, Kilvyn, said the girl was sick, but Vasialla thought the girl seemed healthy enough. She had a rosy complexion and didn't feel warm to the touch. She didn't cough or have any signs of

lesions or the likes. But to hear her clamor on, Vasialla would have thought she was dying. Vasialla wondered if perhaps the girl was overused to her father's pampering. From the moment she'd seen them in her doorway, Vasialla could tell the two children experienced entirely different sides of their father. The girl clung to Kilvyn, and he paid her the whole of his attention. On the other hand, the boy shrunk from him and walked gingerly when in his presence.

“Your sister is going to give me fits. Is she quite ill?”

He shrugged. But for just a moment before the shrug, his mouth opened, as if on the verge of telling her something. She thought—not for the first time—he might not be mute, despite what his father said.

“Why don't you take a bowl of soup to your sister?” Vasialla didn't add that she hoped the food would put an end to the ruckus. “And then come make one for yourself.”

He moved obediently to the caldron and ladled out one healthy serving of the stew. He carried with both hands, as if he was making an offering. Vasialla smiled and turned back to her work. When the boy returned, he hovered at the edge of the room.

“Go on then, help yourself.”

He again filled the bowl with a carefully ladled out portion of the stew. This bowl he brought to her.

“This one is for you,” she said.

He fixated on straightening his tunic, but some color crept up his neck. He nudged the bowl across the table until it was touching her smallest finger.

Vasialla set the broom aside and picked up the bowl. This seemed to put the boy at ease. His shoulders relaxed, and he swiped an errant tress of his reddish-brown hair

behind his ear. While she ate, the boy continued busying himself with the cleanliness of the kitchen.

The smoke from the fire under the pot was filling the room quickly now, so he kicked dirt over the flames to put them out. He stooped, and straightened up holding the dried flowers, re-placing them on the table that they had cleared to cook dinner. He began retrieving the other mementos. She noticed the careful way he placed the looking glass face down, as far away from him on the table as he could put it.

He scooped the *Chasma* up and went to put it back on the shelf.

She interrupted him. “No, no . . . you keep that.”

He hesitated and pulled the jar back to his chest. For a moment, he looked down at the jar before shaking his head.

“Are you deaf as well as mute?” Her voice came out harsher than she intended. She had lived alone for many years and had long-ago forgotten how to interact with other people.

Although she had put it on his arms and hands earlier, she motioned now to his face— to his blackened eye and the long cut from the inner corner of his brow, down his cheek and underneath his chin.

The walls of her home shuddered as the front door swung open and then shut. Heavy footsteps approached the kitchen, each one undoing more of the bond she thought she’d forged with the boy.

“*Duja*, stop bothering our hostess. She has been kind to offer us shelter and prepare her food for us,” his father said. Traces of the handsome young man he’d once been remained in his musculature and the light, bluish hue of his eyes. His hair was far

lighter than either his son's or daughter's and hung in a straight sheet to his shoulders. Right now he was soaked through, the tendrils of his hair dripping the rain water across the floor, and his voice was like ice.

The boy jerked, and the jar fell to the ground. He flinched at the dull thud and fell to his hands and knees to recover it. She stooped—her aged knees and hips cracked and popped as she lowered herself. “Let me help you with that.”

She offered him the stopper.

“Let the boy clean up his own mess. Otherwise he'll never learn.” The man entered and leaned over the caldron. “This smells delicious Vasialla. May I?”

He lifted the ladle and sipped at the stew. He made a guttural sound of appreciation and lifted the ladle in Vasialla's direction.

“Don't eat all of it, your son hasn't eaten yet.”

Kilvyn rounded on his son. “The boy isn't hungry. I try my best with this one, but he's a little,” he made a vague gesture towards his own forehead, “*touched.*”

Vasialla stepped between the man and the boy. “Kilvyn. This is *my* home, and I am not accustomed to sending my guests to bed on an empty stomach. So we will all eat.”

“Of course not,” the man said, stepping back to a polite distance, holding up his hands in apology. “You are most gracious.”

His dark, narrowed eyes lingered on his son as he backed out of the kitchen. Vasialla chided herself for her reaction. This family squabble was none of her business. As soon as the rains passed them by, she would be turning them out of her home. She had

no right to interfere in their lives. Her eyes fell on the jar gripped tight in Rorikund's hand. She'd already meddled.

#

Rorik ate the stew with forced composure. The first mouthful was so rich, and the liquid so warm on its way to his stomach, that he almost couldn't hold it down. But he gulped from the bowl a second time, and a then a third. He would purchase this meal with blood, no doubt; he was determined to enjoy it. That way, he could hold onto the memory later when his father exacted its price from his flesh and marrow.

Beside him, Vasialla sipped her stew and watched him over the brim of her bowl. Her eyes said pity even if her lips did not. Rorik wished he had not dropped the jar. His nerves had put the kind woman in more danger than she knew. His father's cruelty could easily extend to her if she continued to protect him. He ought to be ashamed for letting her place herself between him and his father. He knew he wasn't worth that risk.

Lyra resumed her encumbered groans in the other room. While normally an obnoxious sound, her cries provided a stifling cover for him. He leaned close to Vasialla and said, "Rorik."

The old woman lowered her bowl and turned to face him more fully. She didn't say a word, apparently unsurprised. After all, she had asked him earlier.

"*Y-you* can call me Rorik."

Chapter 14

Giaben scrubbed at the surface of his blade with the foul-smelling vinegar and a rag. A silence born of mourning and absence settled over the camp. Most men kept to their tents in the aftermath of the riots. Most of the Sciannese as well. Rans had not returned to their tent yet and Giaben assumed he was off comforting Reena. His absence gave Giaben the opportunity to kiss two fingers and press them to his forehead without pretending he was having a headache. He whispered a rote prayer to the goddess—though he had forgotten some of the words. He had not yet finished when Commander Jos arrived at the threshold to the tent.

“Giaben, the High Lord issued a summons for the best interpreter of the markings. I have oft praised your work—he will be expecting you.”

“Sir?”

The commander sat down on Rans’s cot. Giaben glanced at him. He often wondered if the commander regretted the kindness he’d shown Giaben as a small boy. The commander never said anything to that effect, but still Giaben saw the heaviness that grew with each season—the sagging shoulders, greying hair, wrinkles folded into the corner of the commander’s eyes and mouth.

“Do as he bids you, or we will both suffer his wrath,” Commander Jos said.

Giaben’s chest tightened. He’d only stood alone before the High Lord once—as a young child—when Commander Jos first brought him to Scianne. For weeks, the two had practiced the lie Giaben would tell; the commander made him say it over and over until he could say it in Sciannin without betraying his thick northern accent. He was Giaben, son of Dryllin, from the border town Zellya. His mother died giving birth to him and

rogue Eantolean rebels killed his father during a hunt. The commander found him on the Zellya's streets, alone and seeking vengeance. Rather than imprison him, the commander petitioned the High Lord to admit him into the army's ranks.

The day he stood before the High Lord, he'd been barely seven years old. Cuts from the whip and the memory of his mother's murder burned with equal intensity. He did want revenge. He wanted it so badly his face heated, and his heart pounded in his chest. Even at seven, he understood that his only revenge would be to live—live a lie so completely that the High Lord never found out his true identity.

Giaben pulled his formal uniform out from under the cot and laid it out. He ran his hand over the maille hauberk and the leather straps of the breastplate. Oil gleamed on the metal surface—no nicks or discoloration from blood. Wearing it felt like a lie. He slid into the armor, tightening the straps and adjusting the plating. He tied his sword belt around his waist and let out a deep breath. He was ready.

Outside, an eerie silence had settled over the encampment and the city. The quiet was so complete that Giaben heard the fire crackling and popping in the overhead ducts. Dead and dying bodies still littered the streets. Their blood oozed in the cracks of the cobblestone. Giaben stepped around them, muttering a prayer for as many as he could. If he'd had the time, or been anywhere besides Scianne. He might have lingered a moment to spit in the mud and draw the sacred symbol on their foreheads. But he hadn't either the time or place, so he recited the prayers and hoped the gods would listen anyways.

Nothing stirred the old religion in him like the aftermath of a battle. Among the dead, he remembered the person he'd once been. He remembered the rituals—not in pictures he way he sometimes recalled childhood—but rather in the memory of his bones.

The motions came to him without thought or effort. Occasionally he had time to mumble through broken eulogies and apologies before they burned the bodies of the fallen. More often, he did not. And the only prayers he offered then were in the nightmares that followed.

The palace guard waved him through at the palace's main entrance. Giaben shielded his eyes when he first crossed the threshold. Fires ran along either side of the corridor in a series of torches and fireplaces. The gilt and marbled hallways reflected the light, giving the illusion that the hallway was glowing almost of its own accord. The brightness was in such contrast to the near total darkness of the camp—even with its fires a-roar, and the star's luminescence—that his eyes watered for a moment.

Unlike the citadel, the palace was alive with raucous laughter and music. Noble folk in finely-dyed silk and velvet dress ambled through the rooms on the lower level. Palace guards stood in pairs outside every doorway. The older guards looked forward with disinterested expressions. Their unexperienced counterparts stood ill at ease, with darting eyes and tight grips on the pommels of their swords.

Each window Giaben passed had thick heavy drapery pulled across to bar the fledgling light from entering—as if the cloth blotted the star's very existence. The noble reveler's gaiety suggested that it had for them; Giaben thought swift and excessive intoxication probably aided their ignorance.

The metal plating on the outside of his boots clanked loudly on the empty staircase leading to the private chambers on the second floor. Although the drapes also covered any windows up here, the mood of the few people Giaben passed in the corridor matched the somberness of the night's events. A pair of veiled governesses hurried cow-

eyed children past him. One of the small girls looked at him with wonder as she passed. Giaben shook the image of her out of his mind. He needed to be clear-headed when he stood before the High Lord.

At the other end of the corridor, the entrance to the High Lord's main study was barred by a small phalanx of soldiers. Gaiben approached the men and offered a salute, "I'm Gaiben; I've been summoned."

The younger man in the front wore a breastplate marked with a smear of bold red stain. He was clearly meant to be in charge and yet his eyes were hollow and withdrawn—not unlike the wide-eyed children Gaiben'd passed moments before in the corridor. Behind the young captain, the more seasoned soldiers stepped to either side. The two men closest to the heavy teak doors dragged them open, admitting Giaben into the chamber.

Giaben took a few steps into the room; not so many as to seem bold but also not so few as to betray his reticence. Robed in darkness, The Lord Dictate sat upon a plush, crimson throne. His face was wrong, like the grin of a dying man. Magic, rumor had it, had compelled his unnaturally long life. Such that no one knew anymore how long the Lord's rule had lasted. Most people conceded though that more years had passed than the youthful leader wore in his face or gut. He had a full head of dark hair yet untouched by grey, and pale, intense eyes that left the impression they could behold more than the object of their gaze desired.

The High Lord stood; he was shorter than Giaben remembered. His skin was taut, but nearly translucent, and bore many scars from magic he had cast using his own blood.

He swept out his ornamented fingers as if inviting Giaben to behold some unseen miracle between them.

Dareund stood just to the right of the High Lord. He looked nervous, unsure of himself. He had on royal livery, but carried no weapon, and the crown on his head was perched precariously on his ears, as if they alone held it from sliding off. He could not have looked more different than his father. Young and flush—teeming with energy and life. The boy scratched at his arm, tapped his fingers across his thigh, looked this way and that as if he could barely contain himself.

Giaben saluted the High Lord and then turned to the squirming Dareund and saluted him as well. The High Lord returned the salute. But his son's eyes wandered over Giaben's armor and weaponry before realizing that he too was meant to return the gesture. He quickly saluted, his complexion flushing pink. His eyes lingered on Giaben's sword. Undoubtedly the weapon was a far cry cruder than the steel the prince had learned to fence with, though it was also almost certainly more efficient.

“You are the one Commader Jos spoke of . . . Captain Giaben of Zellya. You are the best my army hopes to offer me.”

Through a great effort, Giaben resisted the urge to reach for the hilt of his weapon. The same calmness that took over in battle was settling into his spine. He could not afford to be ill at ease. He took a sidelong glance at the guards standing on either side of the room. He might have been able to best them in a fight, but the High Lord was no ordinary man. Giaben said, “My life is yours to command.”

“You will serve as an advisor and personal guard to the First Son. You will go where he goes, and do as he commands. You will protect him even to your death. More so than all the other soldiers, you will be bound to him.”

Giaben saluted again. His breast stung where his fist struck it. This time the First Son responded immediately. Giaben held his gaze when he said, “No enemy will harm him as long as I am living.”

The High Lord waved the oath away almost before Giaben was done speaking. He quickly moved on to when to report and where he would now be stationed. But Giaben hardly heard him. He and the First Son seemed to be having a different conversation. The boy’s jaw was not agape, but his eyes were wider than they had previously been. He looked at Giaben not as a pawn to push around, the way his father did. Rather, he seemed mystified, and beholden to him. Giaben broke the uncomfortable gaze.

The First Son turned to his father. He asked, “I beg your leave.”

The High Lord nodded. The boy moved around the desk and beckoned Giaben to follow him. Giaben’s feet were heavy. The urge to draw his weapon and kill the man responsible for the death of so many lingered. He was close enough that he might just land the blow before the Lord Dictate’s guard struck him down. The High Lord looked up suddenly, fixing Giaben in his sharp gaze. Giaben got the impression that steel alone wouldn’t be enough. He moved stiffly as he followed the First Son into the corridor.

The moment the door closed, the First Son’s lungs deflated as if he’d been holding his breath for too long. He turned to Giaben and said, “You can call me Dareund.”

“My Lord,” Giaben replied.

“I’m not . . . um . . . how should I be commanding you?” The prince’s face was earnest, his eyes pleading.

“I will be with you every waking moment. You should show me where your chambers are and arrange for mine to be adjacent. I will instruct you in combat and accompany you on any journeys you may take. I should also select a handful of guards and soldiers to serve as your vanguard.”

The young prince swallowed hard. His eyes strayed down the empty hall. “Yes, do those things.”

“My Lord.” Giaben said, inclining his head forward respectfully.

Neither one spoke for a moment. While the young prince shifted his weight from one foot to the other and looked around the hallway uncertainly, Giaben’s training held him still.

“Must I show you my chambers now?” The prince asked.

Giaben swallowed. Given the choice, he would have rather led a hundred green soldiers into battle against insurmountable odds than answer that question. No matter how he responded, if the wrong people heard it could be treasonous. “We will go where you see fit to go, and do what you deem necessary.”

“Oh, uh, all right,” the First Son responded. He turned slowly, and beckoned Giaben to follow him down the corridor.

As they walked, the young prince talked incessantly—nervously—much to Giaben’s dismay.

“You’re . . . younger than I remembered.”

Giaben frowned. He was ill at ease making small talk. “Some might say the same thing about you, *my lord*.”

“I meant no offense,” the prince said hastily. “Most of the appointed guards for Loab were grey and scarred.”

Giaben’s cheeks burned. So easily the prince had wheedled under his skin and exposed the raw nerves he tried to keep carefully hidden. “Perhaps they were called to do a different task.”

The prince looked at the ground. The boy’s jaw went a little slack, his eyes narrowed—the same way the commander’s did when he was mulling over a particularly complex and irksome battle strategy. The expression rekindled the fear Giaben felt approaching the palace. The hairs on his forearms and neck raised from his skin, a little voice in the recess of his mind whispering that the whole appointment was a trap. The prince scratched at a healing burn on one of his fingers, catching Giaben’s interest anew.

“What happened to your finger?”

“Oh,” the prince said, “I . . . it gets burned as part of the ceremony for First Sons.”

Giaben motioned for the First Son to show him. The skin around the boy’s finger was still red and swollen. “What are the court physicians treating it with?”

“Calendula and cold water, I think.”

“You should request a tincture of aloe and lavender to help it heal,” Giaben said. He could have made the tincture and dressed the wound himself, but he was loath to help the son of the man responsible for the death of his mother.

The prince repeated the ingredients. Then he asked, “I thought you read markings—how do you know the healing arts?”

“All soldiers worth their salt know basic treatments,” Giaben lied. He tried to imagine Rans administering a balm or salve, brewing a draught or potion, and almost chuckled. Rans was only interested in who he could fight or sleep with—he’d never be patient enough to learn the applications of herbs, salves, draughts and the like. No, most soldiers who saw wounds in battle either died of the pains, or grudgingly went to the army medics.

Giaben’s mother had been the healer for their village. He remembered her humming as she showed him how to prepare various treatments. She told him he had a knack for the healing arts and he’d one day be the village healer. But Giaben couldn’t tell the prince that. He couldn’t speak of his home, nestled into the foot of the cliff overlooking the seas far away in the north east. By this point, Giaben wasn’t even sure he knew the right words anymore.

They arrived at the First Son’s chambers shortly. Giaben stifled his relief. No more questions or disconcerting glances. The prince stopped just inside the doorway and said, “These are my chambers.

Yours are attached through the vestibule there.” The prince pointed to a narrow hallway flush with the outer wall of the chamber.

Giaben acknowledged the prince with a nod then excused himself to send for the soldiers and guards he selected for the prince’s vanguard. In the main corridor, Giaben beckoned the two nearest guards—the older, grizzled man with his edgy young companion, “You. What are your names?”

Hieml was the older man’s name, and Thande was his partner.

“You will both continue in the service our our lord, the First Son as members of his personal guard. Your first task is to fetch the rest of our cohort from the outer camps. Find Rans, and Hilden, and Wollmard and have them bring whatever they desire here. If you know of any guardsmen who are well suited to serve our lord, then I ask you bring them as well.”

Chapter 15

Wello shrieked as an indistinguishable rotten, wet projectile hit the back of her head. People had gathered on either side of the dirt road to watch the soldiers wrestle her. Their eyes were orange with the excessive firelight that ran in weird, elevated troughs along the roadsides. That fire left no shadows. Every dirty, hideous face watched in judgment, shameless. Some of the children—and adults who had no rotten food to spare—threw small stones or swung at her with flexible branch swatches.

Meathead laughed. He leaned over to pick up a couple of rocks, which he handed out to the children. Little Master ignored the people unless they strayed close enough to touch her. Then he would shout, all breathy and ruddy until all the peasants were at a distance he deemed more appropriate.

One filthy child drew too close and Wello snarled and lunged to bite him. But Meathead jerked the rope around her neck and she was pulled onto her behind. Laughter spread through the crowd. Meathead gripped her jaw with his thick fingers, and struck her with his closed fist. Her vision dimmed and he struck her one more time. Her vision swam even after Meathead pulled her to her feet.

Little Master said something to Meathead in a tone that implied Meathead obey him. Meathead summoned a peasant woman to him. She had a long face that resembled a goat's or mule's, with a large smashed nose and watery eyes. She pulled a scrap of cloth out of her hair and held it out to Meathead with a trembling hand. Meathead wound it up and forced the widest part into Wello's mouth. He tied the ends behind her head.

Angry tears rolled over her cheeks and were quickly absorbed into the filthy rag. Through the shroud of wetness, she looked to the palace. It rose out of the mountain like

a jagged hand clawing at the darkness above. The fire running above the streets lit the palace facade from below, making it altogether too visible. The orange light glittered across the rough-hewn walls, and contrasted with the shadowy recesses of the innumerable windows, doors, balconies, turrets, and traps.

The closer they dragged her to it, the more monstrous it became. Those half-shadowed balconies and their windows yawned like portals to *il'umbir*. Wello imagined *Muggedda* waiting on the other side to eat all the souls that crossed the unhallowed thresholds. She almost smiled, but then caught herself, remembering that she would soon be numbered among them.

Although impossibly tall doors of solid dark wood etched with gold stood at the top of a stairway carved into the mountainside, Little Master and Meathead pulled her around the base of the mountain to a smaller, stone tunnel entrance. Before they even entered the tunnel, the ripe, fetid stench of stagnant refuse met them. Wello gagged, but the cloth in her mouth checked the reflex.

At least the tunnels were blessedly dimmer than the streets and palace above. Small torches alternated either rock wall every several paces; occasionally, when they turned a bend, the light would flicker out of existence for a moment. Other soldiers would flatten themselves against the stony wall as Little Master and Meathead marched her past them. Their eyes ablaze with curiosity and something else—the threat of violence she would never be able match.

Her father once told her that the Lieppada in the north make their fur stand on end and shriek as loud as they can to intimidate a tougher predator and discourage attack. She

was not as tall as a Lieppada, and had no shriek for battle; still, Wello glared at them with the most ferocity she could manage and hoped it would have the same effect.

The tunnel segment ended in a wooden ladder leading to a rough circular trapdoor in the rock roof. Meathead went up the rungs first. Wello dug her heels into the ground—attempting once more to stall her doom—but Little Master hoisted her into the air, and Meathead lugged her over the edge of the opening.

She flailed for a moment, shocked once again by the brightness of the halls. The whole corridor was on fire. She lunged for the hole, desperate to escape back into the dark. But Meathead quickly pinned her face down under his knee. She chewed on the gag to stop herself from crying out in pain. Slowly, her eyes adjusted to the light, and she saw that the corridor proper was not on fire, but rather that flames climbed from troughs at the base of each wall to lick at the ceiling. Some of the panic loosened its grip on her chest. The soldiers hauled her to her feet, and the tiresome march continued.

The corridors were all bronze and gold and fire—so much so that Wello longed for the difference of the natural world. Unlike these corridors, each tree was its own design, each rock filled a unique shape, and the darkness held it all together. They passed by a kitchen with twelve open pits and hundreds of splotchy-cheeked women in stained linen dresses. Men and women carrying platters of exotic fruits and meats were walking from the opposite end of the corridor in an intermittent procession.

Little Master shouted while Meathead jostled Wello to the front of the procession. Wello muttered a prayer into the tear-stained gag as she was forced through a door into the largest chamber she had ever seen. The ceiling was so high it easily bested any cavern she and her father had ever slept in. She imagined even the wings of a bird would be

exhausted before it reached the pinnacle of the dome. In the center of the wall opposite the entrance, a gold throne of etched corpses clawed upward, sucking in all the light.

Sudden, chest-thumping, breath-stopping fright burst within her. Atop the throne, ir Drogkarnor himself sat. Wello could tell he was all wrong even from this distance. His skin was pallid and stretched too thin, as if a blind artisan had tried to cover a grotesque statue with flesh.

The scars on her hands throbbed under their wrappings when his pale, lifeless eyes fell on her. She stumbled under the all-too-physical weight of his gaze. Her vision faded, and she found her mind wandering back towards the woods—towards the tree and the book sheltered within it. She shook her head to clear the vision. A sharp pain stabbed her head between her eyes and she gave a small cry. Only once the pain subsided did Wello look up again and see, sitting beside ir Drogkarnor, the young man with white hair and gray eyes from her vision.

He appeared younger—less confident than she had first presumed. He wore a crown that reflected the same golden light as the throne.

“Noa, noa, noa,” Wello said, tugging against Meathead’s grip. Little Master grabbed her by the nape of her neck and shoved her down onto her hands and knees. He said something to ir Drogkarnor in a booming voice that resounded in the vacuous chamber. All other conversation ceased, and it felt as if everyone held their collective breaths, waiting for their lord to respond.

To Wello’s surprise, the white-haired boy stood and issued a command. An audible gasp sounded from a lady seated on the left of ir Drogkarnor and a soldier behind the white-haired boy blanched.

Wello's breath rasped loudly in her ears, drowning out the rest of the room. Had she been standing, she was sure her knees would have buckled. Her eyes closed and she waited for the sting of steel at the base of her neck. It never came. Instead, Meathead and Little Master hauled her to her feet. The pale boy was walking towards them, his face grim and terrible. Wello found herself pressing hard against Little Master, leaning away from the prince.

He took neck hem of her dress in his hands and rent it down the middle to her thighs. The air was treacherously warm, but not as warm as his fingers as they trailed along her stomach and hipbone. She lunged at him, screaming pure hate; the two soldiers held her back. The prince pulled his hand away and turned back towards his throne.

Little Master and Meathead pushed her towards a robust woman with a stern face, and arms roughly the size of tree trunks. The woman lifted Wello's arm until her shoulder hit her ear with every step. And so she was half-dragged, half-carried from the chamber.

#

Dareund woke feeling more exhausted than when he went to sleep. Two of his new personal guards—Giaben and Rans—stood across the room, silent. Dareund recognized the silence; he'd seen it plenty of times when he interrupted adults talking about private matters. Gaiben's back was rigid and Rans ground his teeth.

“Did I sleep through the first gong?” Dareund asked.

When Giaben didn't respond, Rans said, “You did, my lord. You appeared to be unwell, so we let you sleep.”

Dareund sat up. His head throbbed and it hurt to keep his eyes open. Since becoming First Son, Dareund had dreamt increasingly of monsters. So much time had

passed between the last of his childhood nightmares and now that he was ashamed to admit to his troubled sleep aloud.

“I’m well,” Dareund said, “What did I miss?”

“Only your breakfast,” Gaiben said. “I’ll fetch the scullery maid and have her bring you a platter.” He exited the room in swift, lanky strides.

Dareund let out a long breath. While neither of the soldiers particularly liked him, Dareund felt Rans disapproved of him only for his youth and inexperience. Giaben presented a steely façade, but Dareund felt the man harbored a different, more intense hostility towards him.

Giaben came back—not with the scullery maid, but rather a small army of manservants and maids. They immediately set themselves the task of scrubbing, cleaning, changing linen, dusting, and sweeping the room. Two manservants produced a ridiculous tunic complete with suede and silk embroidery and frilly lace openings at the cuff and hems. On a plush pillow held by two cloaked women, the same cumbersome crown sat waiting, gleaming madly—half-shadowed, half-burning in firelight.

“My lord,” Giaben said, gesturing with an open palm for Dareund to rise. “A feast in your honor is underway, and your mother waited on you while you slept. She seems anxious to speak with you.”

Dareund couldn’t quite picture her anxious. Once when he was younger, he overheard his mother telling a handmaid that patience and poise beget a lady more than nerves and chatter. If she was anxious, Dareund dreaded to discover the cause.

“Am I supposed to wear this finery every time I leave my chambers?”

The servants wrestled the tunic over his head, muffling his voice. As Dareund's head poked through the opening of the tunic, he saw Rans grinning. Even Giaben looked less dour than usual. He said, "Your mother requested you wear this tunic specifically."

Rans lifted a hand to cover his mouth—as if that were enough to stifle the sound of his chuckle. Dareund caught his eyes and the soldier quickly sobered up. He bowed slightly and said, "Forgive me, my lord."

"Stand up," Dareund said. The order felt strange in his mouth, and the words aloud seemed to lack any authority. Still, Rans straightened, looking repentantly at his feet. Dareund wanted to shout at the men, tell them that the entire kingdom was looking to him; tell them that everybody wanted to give him advice; that everyone wanted something from him and he didn't need them questioning and mocking his every decision. Didn't they know he could have them tortured and dismembered?

Instead, he motioned for Rans to go, saying, "Leave us."

Rans hesitated until Giaben gave a curt nod. He bowed again and left the room. Giaben stood with statuesque rigidity. The servants finished dressing him and laid the crown atop his head. They stepped back; the crown's gold pooled in their eyes. Dareund wanted to recoil from the feverish devotion on their faces—it was as if the crown had transformed him from an invisible prince to a sacred artifact.

Giaben tilted his head towards the door, and the servants filed out as silently as they came. Although the soldier didn't speak, Dareund felt a question burning between them. "You think I don't know what I'm doing."

"Irrelevant, my lord," Gaiben said, the sour expression again tugging at his lips. "I will serve you, and protect you with my life if necessary."

“Not irrelevant. I *don't* know what I'm doing.”

This statement seemed to surprise the soldier. His eyebrows raised briefly before he recomposed himself.

“You say you'll die to protect me? I would rather not be a bumbling idiot who leads his men to their peril. I am relying on the advice of my advisors—*your* advice—to help me become a capable leader.”

Giaben said, “My lord. Your empire awaits.”

“Let's go then,” Dareund said, aware that the soldier was intentionally avoiding his plea for counsel.

The city seemed to have recovered from the initial shock of the star's emergence while Dareund had slept. Some of the heavy drapes that previously were pulled tight now hung open, letting the star's illumination push against the shadows in the corridors and chambers he passed. Breakfast roiled, uneasy on his stomach, and the light leeches his strength. He panicked, overwhelmed by a sudden urge to retch. But the captain's pale eyes tracked him with singular focus. Dareund swallowed hard.

“P-people look less afraid,” Dareund said. The quaver in his voice belied the attempt to sound casual.

The soldier watched him still. He said, “You have given them courage. They heard you've been holding secret councils and may have reached a decision—a strategy of attack. They think you are going to ride north and vanquish this ill omen that haunts their heavens.”

“But I haven't—” Dareund still shook his head, even after Giaben interrupted him.

“You have. Your father, our supreme high lord,” Giaben made the circular gesture of devotion to his father with two fingers, “spread the joyous news from here to Afyldeen. People have been called to Scianne to bring you tribute before we disembark north.”

“Oh.”

Despite his effort, the word came out strangled and flat. Tribute meant fanfare. A feast or ball before his departure, which was looking ever more imminent. Giaben spoke again, saying, “The people already look to you for guidance and leadership. My advice is that you feign competence and keep your doubts concealed—unless you’d like to see more riots and death in city’s streets.”

“Deaths?” Dareund asked. The violence felt so far away—too distant to have consequences. Fires and chaos. Death. Dareund couldn’t quite imagine it. “How many?”

“Nobody counted . . . a lot.” The soldier’s voice was flat, and Dareund suspected the statement didn’t cover the totality of his knowledge on the subject. But perhaps that was the hard edge he saw in the guard’s eyes—the edge of seeing too much of life’s violence.

Dareund stopped at one of the newly opened windows. He repeated his father’s lie. “I have been holding secret councils and now I have a plan.”

Internally, he added that in this moment his plan was little more than running as far away from the war and the starlight as possible. He shook his head. Where would he run? He smoothed out the front of his tunic and made the silk laces lay flat.

His father awaited him in the great hall, along with his mother and a host of supplicant subjects with their tribute. A hush fell across the crowd as he passed them, and

bowed low before his father. He recalled one of the formal phrases from his schooling. He said, “All my glory is but a reflection of your glory, my Lord.”

“Rise, my First Son. Take your seat at my side and receive the tribute of your subjects.”

“As you allow,” Dareund said. He caught his mother’s eye. She wore a circlet that reflected her new status as the Queen Mother. Her dress was a regal hue that mirrored the glass of wine she hoisted to her lips. Rubies and pearls draped her neck and wrists, and heavy gold earrings pulled at her ear lobes. But she looked happy—and perhaps a little anxious. Whatever she wished to speak to him about, she was apparently reluctant to discuss in the presence of his father. Dareund bowed to her and took his seat on the right-hand side of his father.

No sooner did he sit than two tawny women brought forth the first tribute—lush red fruit carried on a silver and gold leaf platter. A darker, ebony man accompanied them, wearing the traditional loose tunic and trousers of the Yulmn—a conquered people who lived in the remote mountain region to the west of Scianne. The man spoke, saying: “My lord, my people have selected the very best *aswahs* from our harvest for your tribute. I believe you will find the fruit as delicious as the legends say.”

“I accept your tribute,” Dareund said, trying to sound gracious rather than uncertain, “on behalf of my father. All that I have is his.”

The Yulmnim man swept his arm across his belly, and bent at the waist. The platter of fruit was then presented to his father before being sent to a table specially prepared to receive the tribute. The next small group stepped forward; two men led a gray dappled stallion with a beautifully braided mane and supple leather saddle.

“My lord,” one of the men said, “we have journeyed from the desert on behalf of our people, the Dreddad, to bring you this tribute. A Dreddadian steed is the most noble and well-bred steed your majesty could desire. His name is Griest, and he is swifter than the sand funnels of the desert in which he was born.”

Dareund repeated the rote dedication to his father, and the horse, too, was led away. Quickly the table filled with silks, and horns, and goblets, and jewels, and all manner of riches from every corner of the kingdom. Dareund fidgeted in his seat, wondering how many more tributes remained for presentation. The sound of shouting and commotion from the corridor interrupted the next tribute, and Dareund straightened up in his throne.

Two roughshod soldiers cajoled a young woman around his age towards the head of the tribute procession. She wore a grubby dress coated in so much grime that the color of the fabric was no longer discernible. Under the dirt and mess of dark hair, however, she was rather striking. She had defiant eyes, and a streak of silvery white hair marred the otherwise ebony tresses.

Her gaze roved over the room, and her face hid none of her fear or disgust. Dareund remembered the nameless girl killed in the soldier’s camp—the fine mist of her blood spraying through the air and the surprised look in her eyes. He wondered what had been the cause of her surprise, because it couldn’t have been her punishment. He felt responsible for her death; a feeling that had settled with him during the stilted conversation he’d shared with Giaben. He didn’t want to be responsible for another girl’s death.

His heart was choking up his throat. But he swallowed and found a place of composure to hold onto before he spoke. Any hint of his true feelings would only reflect his weakness. He tried to mimic the tone his brother Oran used when he was trying to pick a fight with Dareund. He asked, “where did you find this forest rat?”

The soldier answered, “we found her skulking about near the ruins of Demaré.”

Anxiety kept an inescapable stranglehold on Dareund’s lungs. He had only ever felt that way once before, when he was a young child. He was in the kitchens with Une while she oversaw the scullery maids and cooks. One cook trapped a rat under pot, and everyone watched—enraptured—as the woman scooted the pot closer and closer to one of the lit fire pits. The rat’s frenzied squeaks turned to shrill, prolonged shrieks and the rat’s claws scraped against the ironware until at last the heat cooked him to death.

Dareund thought he now knew how that rat felt, being swept closer and closer to its demise. But, like the rat, Dareund could not figure a way out.

He swallowed, and focused on the girl. The rest of the room melted away, and he took a slow, deep breath. If he turned this tribute over to his father, he would either kill her or put her to work as a harlot amidst the soldiers of the city. Both options seemed terribly unjust to Dareund. He thought he also saw a pleading, desperate expression just beneath the bright defiance and determined set of the woman’s jaw.

“She is pleasing to me.” Dareund’s voice sounded cold and distant to him. “Have her cleaned and brought to my bedchamber.”

The room sucked in a collective breath.

Dareund rose and walked towards her through the throng of courtiers and subjects with tribute until he was close enough to touch her. He knew that what he did could not

appear as mercy, or he would have only succeeded in joining her in death. His hand trembled as he took the neck of her dress and tore the fabric until it gaped open, exposing her bare, russet skin. Her violet eyes watered, and her lips stretched into a snarl. Her body trembled, making Dareund's stomach flop. His eyes stopped first on her breasts, but he didn't have the fortitude to touch them. Instead, he ran his fingertips over her belly and side. He turned back to his father.

“Father, all of my glory is but a reflection of your glory. All that I have and all that I desire is yours. I request to keep this tribute for my own. I would desire to have her as my first concubine. That she might be to me, even as my mother is to you, my most high Lord.”

He held his head bowed to his father until his neck ached.

Finally, his father responded, saying: “I am pleased with your choice, my First Son. This wench will be your first lover, though she cannot by worthiness be called your wife. You will keep her secluded until she is bound to you and obeys your word. Go, now, and enjoy your spoils.”

Dareund exhaled and hoped it was imperceptible to his father. He deepened his bow before straightening. Only then did he see his mother's face glaring down at him. Her cheeks were splotched red, and her lips stretched into an angry thin line. He had not yet heard the last of this.

Chapter 16

When she heard Peglerri poached some eggs for breakfast, Elbeda perked up. They'd been eating the nearly-rotted meat from Drehn's latest kill for a week now. Even the smell of the meat made Elbeda's stomach roil. Not that upsetting her stomach required any special skill as of late. Her morning routine now seemed to include emptying her stomach.

She cradled the eggs in her hands one at a time. Each one's smooth pales surface was plump and roughly the size of her fist. She held it up. The star had returned to the sky, and it illuminated the rotund shell. A prayer fell from her lips. She stumbled through the supplication, aware of the years that had passed since her last devotion.

"Are you going to cook them, or will we simply admire them in place of breakfast?" Drehn asked.

Elbeda bumped him with her hip. She said, "Quiet, or *Ghallmae* might rob the eggs of their flavor."

"No," Drehn replied, and faked a gasp. He grinned and Elbeda felt unsettled for a moment. She couldn't quite determine what about it set her on edge. The expression wasn't too toothy, or menacing, but it didn't reach his eyes. In fact, empty was the word she settled on.

"Teasing the goddess is a dangerous game," Elbeda said. The amount of emotion behind the sentiment surprised Elbeda. She hadn't actively worshipped since she sought refuge in Scianne. Years. The goddesses felt distant and unattached to her all her life. But some deep part of her still respected the beliefs instilled in her in childhood, and someone mocking them bothered her.

“I’m a dangerous man.” Drehn said it with a deadpan expression that made Elbeda believe him. A chill rested on the back of her neck. The knife she wore hidden in her skirt’s waistband pressed into her gut, providing some small comfort.

A smile broke out across Drehn’s face, and the moment of tension broke with it. He gave her shoulder a squeeze and wandered off through the clearing. Even after she could no longer see him through the dimly lit trees, Elbeda felt as if his eyes weighed down on her.

The rim of the cauldron absorbed the fire’s heat and the egg sizzled where it dripped when Elbeda cracked it. Elbeda hummed to keep the overwhelming silence of the forest at bay, and because the soft sound reminded her of Beaumont. The longing she felt clumped up in her throat—a raw, painful sadness. She missed the rhythm of his foot kicking the wheel along. Everything he did seemed to fall in time with that staccato rhythm—even his hot breath on her breasts when he was about to come. Elbeda unconsciously massaged her breasts. They felt swollen and ached for days now.

Elbeda heard the forest underbrush cracking behind her and swiftly let go of herself. She didn’t want to disclose the pregnancy to her traveling companions. She couldn’t say why, but perhaps she just needed this one thing to be only hers. After all, she was the one who would carry the child until birth. She was the one who would labor to bring it safely into the world. Her breasts would feed the child, and her voice would sooth it to sleep.

“Smells delicious,” Ulndur said.

Elbeda said, “it does, doesn’t it?”

“Did you spend a lot of time with your mother or father in the kitchen as a child?”

“No.” Elbeda shivered. The air carried a chill, but the cold in her bones was a different, permanent cold. “I learned to cook in Scianne.”

Beaumont taught her. How to defeather a bird, how to mince vegetables, what portion of water to use when making rice—everything she knew. When she first arrived, he seemed like a benevolent god to her. She’d so willingly fell under his influence and into his bed. Unlike the threat of her father’s touch, Beaumont was gentle and kind. Although she couldn’t say she *loved* him, she cared deeply for him, and missed the intimacy they shared.

“Where were you just now?” Ulndur asked. He looked sharply at her face through beady eyes.

“I was home.” They needn’t know too much about her.

“Devri?”

“Yes,” Elbeda lied. Most Eantoli would mark her a traitor for living and sleeping with their enemy. They would shun her and exile her. Nevermind that she fled a nightmare. Nevermind that as a child she’d been cold, hungry, and made to live like an animal until her father’s interest in her sexuality blossomed. They would only hear that she lived among the Sciannese and left a part of her heart there.

“We’ll be there soon enough, *Elbakund*.”

Elbeda forced a smile.

“Let’s eat some of those eggs,” Ulndar suggested. The others appeared from the forest as if summoned by the word eat.

Barfromme produced three small candles. One at a time, he lit them from the fire pit and passed them around the small circle. When they were all lit, he used the tip of his

sword to stir dirt over the fire until only ribbons of smoke remained. Elbeda thought their little troupe looked sinister, half-shadowed-half-illuminated by the hard, flickering light. She shook herself free of the thought. All the men had been nothing but kind and respectful—even Peglerri, despite his unsettling gaze and his predatory grin.

The eggs went down smooth, and Elbeda hoped that was an omen they wouldn't come back up later. She finished her breakfast first and left the others sitting in the candle-light. Breaking camp was increasingly difficult for her. Each time they moved out, she felt the new weight of the distance. She couldn't free herself from the thought that she'd not be returning. Not in time to mend her relationship.

Elbeda looked down at her belly, and squished the center of her stomach together between her hands. Mostly she squished the fabric of her skirts, but she thought just maybe she felt some extra flesh there as well. Each day she pinched at the spots around her waist and hips where she was filling out. Having always been a girl that looked outwards to the world, she thought it strange to suddenly be so mesmerized by the changes—changes she couldn't even see yet—in her own body. As hard as she tried, she couldn't come up with a satisfactory answer for the way a baby could grow an entire personage while inside her: one limb at a time, or perhaps they started as tiny replicas and grew until they pushed their way into the larger world. She decided that the only answer until she could hold the child in her two arms was that it lived in the place her heart ached with both fear and joy when she thought of that moment.

Now, she didn't have time to worry. She needed sharp eyes and sharper wits on the journey. The road had been surprisingly desolate since passing Demon's Door; not only were there no indications of *ir Drogkarnor's* scouts, but no travelers alone or in

groupings. Elbeda remembered her journey to the city as a child. The memories lived in a dark, long-abandoned place in her mind.

Fear. She remembered the kind of fear that left her crouching in the shadowy embrace of a knotted trees roots for so long she couldn't move her limbs properly when time came she felt safe—or safe *enough*—to continue on her way; fear that lived in every unseen, but heard movement of the world so tightly wound in darkness; fear that transformed an eleven year old girl into a woman. She also remembered the other travelers. She spent nearly as much time hiding, allowing other travelers to pass without confrontation. Sometimes they passed unaware of her lurking in those black nooks of the world she, herself feared. Other times, they called out into the night, begging her to reveal herself as friend, while their voices betrayed their fear that she might be foe.

The journey now seemed too removed from other people. Where were the families that stuck to their own patch of land, independent of any affiliation to society? Where were the messengers sent out from The Eantol Collective with news from the *Adumadorn's* visions? No woman with her crop or trade in route to another village, or man on errand from the household graced the forest floor.

Elbeda looked out across the night. She saw too much—silvery silhouettes against the inky backdrop, thin wispy clouds that promised no rain in the immediate future, the finger-like shadows of branch and root clutching at the places light touched. They were nearing the summit of the lowest peak of the Crook'd Spine. Another day's hike would bring them the rest of the way.

A grumble so low she almost didn't believe she heard it broke the silence of the night. Her breath caught, as if all the energy subsumed with the act was required to fuel

her pounding heart. Stillness and silence on the outside masked the screaming voice inside telling her to run, to call out for help, to laugh in case she'd only imagined the sound. Instead she held pose for an eternity, waiting to hear the noise again.

A quick movement at her elbow startled her from the wait, and she spun, soundlessly drawing knife from waistband until it gleamed in the moonlight, tip to Drehn's throat. He didn't seem surprised, though he did hold up his hands to reassure her. "What's jumped in your drawers?"

Elbeda drew her finger to her lips. But she felt as if the air had shifted, and the night was again empty. Still holding the knife between them, she said, "I heard something."

Drehn opened his mouth in mock-surprise.

"Stop," Elbeda said, anger heating her face. "I'm serious. I was not alone."

"Of course not, I was here behind you nearly the whole time," Drehn said.

Elbeda lowered the blade.

"Not you. The sound came from that direction." She pointed across the hollow to a knot of trees on the upward slope of the nearest, sharp incline. Drehn's whole face glowed with mischief as he tip-toed over to the tree-line. He hesitated, making a mock-scared face towards her before leaping into the underbrush. Leaves and twigs spiraled in the air, the victims of his wanton hacking. He poked his head back through the trees. "Nothing here."

"Well, not after that," Elbeda said, gesturing to the disturbed foliage.

Drehn gave the bush one more emphatic whack before traipsing back to where Elbeda stood. Sweat stained the front and back of his tunic in a deep vee from the

neckline—an unusual amount for the early autumn chill in the air. As they turned to walk back towards the camp, Elbeda gazed over her shoulder at the shadowy underbrush, unable to shake the feeling of being stalked.

#

They packed up camp, and struck out up the mountain. The path cut a near vertical swath through the trees, and Elbeda's breath quickly drew ragged in her lungs. What she earlier thought was only a mild chill in the air now burned her nose and throat with each inhale. She dug her fingers into the moist earth with each footfall to help keep her balance. Barphrem climbed directly in front of her, just behind Ulndur. Elbeda tried to use the fresh indents from his holds, but he has a good foot and half on her, and she couldn't quite stretch the distance between his reaches. Drehn followed closely behind her, and Peglerri brought up the rear. He straggled out of sight, but Elbeda heard the rasp of his hard breath echoing like her own. Ulndur used a pick to help him on his ascent. The rhythmic thud of the claw burrowing into the dirt set an unyielding pace for their climb.

She still couldn't shake the feeling that just beyond the limits of her vision, something crept along, keeping her in sight. Not a *kleg*, surely—from the stories passed down, a single one could slaughter an entire village—why would one stalk, when it could devour?

Elbeda dug her fingers into another clump of moist dirt. More earth slid down the cliff-side with each step, giving Elbeda the strange sensation she was moving in place. Sudden pain gripped her stomach and she gave a violent heave. The eggs that were so

delicious going down now burned the back of her throat and nose coming out. The urgency of it robbed her arms of their strength. She fell against the cold, moist ground.

Chapter 17

Even after the girl was dragged from the throne room, Giaben's heart continued to palpitate. His hand rested on the hilt of his sword in a way that he hoped appeared more casual than it felt. For the first time in his nearly two decades as a soldier, he was grateful for the composure the army taught him. He wore it like a second skin now, masking the tumult he felt inside. Something about the girl reminded him of that strange time before memory—like a lullaby that he knew but couldn't place. He tried to shake his mind free from the illusion; he needed to be present now.

The Lord Dictate was standing up. The folds of fabric brushing against each other as they fell freed to the ground carried through the heavy silence in the room. The courtiers and other tributaries looked to the throne as if frozen under a spell. Giaben's hand slid off the hilt of his sword to his side. Anger helped lap up the nerves. Anger at the young First Son for exposing them all to his father's wrath.

Up close, the Lord Dictate was truly horrifying to behold. His blue-black veins pulsed wildly under thin, greying skin. His eyes—red bleeding into the whites around bottomless black irises. The man reeked of death under the veneer of the aristocratic rosewater bath clinging to his flesh. The power he had harnessed over the uncountable span of his lifetime charged the air around him like the moments before lightning struck. Nausea roiled in Giaben's gut and he couldn't say whether it was because of the raw, potent energy rolling off the Lord Dictate or because he was in the presence of the man responsible for the deaths of so many, Giaben's mother included.

Giaben's fist clapped the right side of his chest in time with Rans's salute, and they both took a knee. Giaben was grateful to be closer to the ground: it steadied his

nerves and made his trembling hands less obvious. The First Son bowed low from his waist then straightened back up. Giaben wondered if the young man didn't feel the corrupted magic poisoning the air, or if he was simply a braver, stronger man than Giaben. When he'd first learned the salute, Giaben had thought it was a silly, empty gesture. Commander Jos told him the closed fist symbolized the might they received from the Lord Dictate, and when they struck fist against chest—so close to where their hearts beat—it was an invitation for him to take their very lives if that was his pleasure. The was the first time Giaben was close enough to the Lord Dictate to fear offering that invitation. But mercifully, his bloodshot eyes rested squarely on the crown of his son's bowed head.

When the Lord Dictate spoke, despite the softness of his tone, his voice cut through the entire room. “She is indeed a fine choice—not unlike my own first paramour. Be wise and guard your heart. Women have a way of corrupting your very soul if you're not careful.”

“Thank you, my lord, for the most sage advice,” The First Son said. His words came out slowly, carefully, as if he was aware that he stood on the edge of a blade and could fall either way.

“Do not forget that your glory is a reflection of my own, and your actions are my actions.”

“May I please you in all my endeavors, as I seek to emulate your lordship.”

“I have no doubt you will,” the Lord Dictate said. “Rise, my son, brightest of my offspring, so that your glory may better reflect my own.”

The room held its collective breath as the First Son regained his upright posture. Even though the Lord Dictate's voice was soft, mellifluous even, Giaben did not doubt the hush hid a sharper edge. But in the silence of the throne room, where words carried unusually far, a threat was better left unspoken. The First Son was an honorary title—a position whose sole purpose was to extend the power and the reach of their Lord Dictate. Although a somewhat arbitrary bylaw was included naming the First Son the official successor to the throne, none would ever live long enough to unseat their father. Magic, as far as Giaben knew it to exist in this man, extended life beyond the span of even ten men's natural lives. Centuries had passed, languages and kingdoms had been erased from memory, so many generations had been born into slavery that most of them no longer knew any definition of freedom and still the Lord Dictate sat on his hard-won throne.

A deep breath drew the Lord Dictate's nostrils to narrow slits, otherwise his expression and tone remained unchanged. "Enjoy this gift I give you: two weeks. Use her as best pleases you and when you take my campaign to the west, put her from your mind—lest she distract you."

"May your glory be reflected back to you through my actions."

The Lord Dictate turned, sweeping his black robes in semicircle across the floor and breaking the fragile spell gripping the room.

The Lord Dictate turned in a swirl of dark robes and fragrant rosewater death and returned to his throne, taking with him the pall that consumed Giaben. He noticed a knot of tension uncoiling itself in the First Son's shoulders and spine.

Giaben was reminded, suddenly, that he and the young man were not so far off from each other in age, despite his opinion of the First Son's inexperience. The boy was

probably fifteen, to Giaben's twenty-seven. Not a great span all things considered.

Perhaps what Giaben had failed to account for was the experience life in the castle had afforded the boy. The experience to navigate the court and manipulate the people who would take advantage of his new, elevated station.

Something almost indiscernible eased within the crowd. Not anything so audible as a whisper, or the long-awaited exhale he'd anticipated. But still, the air breathed easier. The First Son returned to his seat upon the lesser throne and the next delegation stepped forward with their tribute.

Giaben quickly lost track of the gold cuffs, the *Nahsrahn* blades, succulent *Gaugua*, and the likes. *A fortnight* rang in his ears like a condemnation. That fear that he always carried along the length of his spine prickled at him. Others might call him *daekkar*—demon on the battlefield—but his dead lingered on his conscience, and he imagined the reek of death clung to him also. Had he not been standing before the entire court, he might have run his fingers along the pale raised line just under his chin. How he wished Rans had not caught his legs in time and cut the rope. In the event that existence continued beyond life, Giaben was sure that his own death would be the only one not to haunt him.

He spared a quick—quicker than he would have liked—glance at Rans. Rans stood with self-assured ease than Giaben envied. His dark eyes roamed over the heads of the courtiers. If he'd dared to look longer, Giaben knew his gaze would have traced the strong square jawline and lingered on the hollow of his friend's throat. But he didn't dare. He'd looked too long already.

The low reverberating signal from the gong marked the passing of the second quarter of the day and shook Giaben out of his thoughts. The Lord Dictate gave a lazy flick of his wrist. The fire running in the gutter around the room dimmed and the line of emissaries began to break up. Slaves previously unseen suddenly swarmed from the shadows and set to work directing emissaries to their chambers. The Lord Dictate was ushered out through the small vestibule behind the throne that led to a heavily guarded back corridor.

Giaben took a deep breath before following the First Son in the same direction. They moved quickly through the corridor—fortunately, in the opposite direction of the Lord Dictate. The First Son, who was always pale, had an even more ghostly hue than normal. His wide-eyed expression made him look younger, more like a child than an adolescent.

He grabbed Giaben's arm and tugged him to halt. The other guards stopped too, though Hilden and Rans looked uncomfortable with the complacency. Giaben said, "Why don't you both go ahead and make sure the way to the First Son's chambers are clear."

Both men saluted him and hurried down the corridor. Rans looked back over his shoulder and met Giaben's gaze. Giaben nodded—hoping the gesture appeared reassuring.

"What have I done?" The First Son said. His voice was soft—the words meant only for him.

Giaben knew the danger. He knew that the girl's life was not the only one caught in the balance. But the naivete of the First Son's expression pulled at a place of pity and compassion in Giaben. "You meant to spare a girl's life."

"I have merely bought her a fortnight."

"Knowing the best course of action can be difficult. Especially when you must serve your function within the court. Let it be a small comfort that you did what you thought to be right."

The First Son lowered his gaze. His thoughts seemed distant, and his face unreadable. He no longer looked like a child. "I'm going to have to bed her now."

Giaben's stomach twisted. "Yes. I believe that is your father's expectation. Would she be your . . . you know . . . first?"

"No."

Giaben felt his brow raising in surprise. The First Son was so young, and as far as Giaben's experience with him went, less corrupted by his father's sadism.

"But not like this," the First Son said quickly. "We both wanted to."

"If you could, would you spare this girl?"

The First Son's eyes moistened, and his voice was choked when he said, "Yes. I meant only to save her life. This was the only way I knew."

Giaben squeezed the boy's shoulder. The First Son said, "Help me, please."

"Let me go to the girl—speak with her. Perhaps there is a way I can ease this for you both." Giaben was relieved the First Son didn't ask him how he would converse with the feral girl. Glad also, that he had the opportunity to intervene.

#

When Dareund's mother found him, she stormed towards him, holding her skirt in both hands so as to march unhindered—a behavior she railed against because she always said it was unladylike. Dareund stepped towards her, trying not to let his shoulders creep up around his face like they wanted to whenever he felt sheepish.

“My son,” she said, dropping her skirts. The words themselves were ordinary but she said them with such venom, “an audience?”

Even though she voiced it as a question, Dareund knew from her tone it was not a request. She grabbed his arm and pulled him aside as she gave his guard a suspicious glance. “What in the name of all the goddesses and gods are you doing?”

Up close, Dareund could see she was shaking—although he wasn't sure if it was from anger or fear. “I—”

He barely got a word out before she cut him off. “You would see me burned on a pyre next to you? All for some whore!”

“I only wanted to see her spared,” Dareund said quickly so as to finish before she could object.

“Your every move is watched. Your father. His advisers. The people. You are the First Son,” she said. “You must play the part or it will spell death for you, me, your guards. People are relying on you to be strong.”

“I *am* First Son,” Dareund said. He continued, even though he knew he was speaking a falsehood, “I can do as I please.”

She smacked him on the side of the head with her satin-gloved hand. Both his guards moved towards him, but he waved them off. He looked into his mother's face. Tendrils of her hair had escaped their pins and hung, mingled with her eye lashes. Her

mouth was tight, and the pain on her eyes was gathering in the creases that marked her age. He felt as if he was seeing her for the first time—as if all his life she'd worn a mask and at last it had fallen away.

“Did I raise a fool?” She straightened up and smoothed her hair out of her eyes.

“I'm sorry mother, I am doing my best,” he replied. He pitied her suddenly, and then himself. Was this all his life would be? Jockeying for favorable position in court? Trying to hold onto power that would consume him? Deep down he'd known when he was crowned First Son, it meant his death. The longest tenure as First Son had been a fifteen year stretch by a son who lived long before Dareund was conceived.

His mother looked away, and Dareund saw the gleam of tears unshed in her eyes. She spoke softly, saying, “I know. You never were one for the intricacies of court. If you looked less like *her* perhaps you would be spared this burden.”

Dareund knew Sorea was the *her* his mother spoke of. The witch who saw the terrible future of his father's reign and spilled her own blood to curse them. His father had once loved her. A faint echo of that love existed between his parents because his mother bore a resemblance to Sorea, and he as well. All pale and white-haired, with the pale blue eyes, and sharp angled faces.

“You realize you may have saved her from death, but her fate is no better,” she said. She never spoke to him about her youth—about the time before she loved her father. He wondered if she truly loved him or if the emotion was born out of the need to survive. Although he tried, he couldn't imagine how awful it must have been to be bedded and beat in turns.

“I will be gentle,” he said. He felt an itch on his arm—a manifestation of the awkwardness that had crept into the conversation. He felt the hot splotches of crimson on his face and neck. “I’m no brute.”

She cupped his cheek with the same hand that she’d slapped him with. She seemed about to say something else, but her open mouth trembled, then closed into a sad smile.

Dareund changed the subject clumsily. “You wanted to speak to me before the feast. I’m sorry, I slept through the gong.”

“It no longer matters,” she said. That smile lingered on her lips, “you have chosen your path and mine. All will be well.”

Her words rang hollow, and Dareund’s guilt tightened its grip on his gut. He almost apologized again, but the word sorry didn’t seem adequate.

She spoke again. “You should go ready yourself. This will be a big night for you.”

She turned and ran her hands over her bodice, straightened her skirts and walked away. He remembered once, she had told him that the first person to leave held power in any conversation. But he’d always thought walking away first meant weakness—a lack of strength to see a difficult conversation through to its end.

“We should go, my lord,” Giaben said and Dareund nodded. But he remained a moment, looking after his mother’s diminishing figure.

Chapter 18

The room was small, with a low ceiling and a sloping metal monstrosity of a chair secured over a large iron grate in the floor. The smell of mildew and stagnant water infused the space, causing Wello's nose to wrinkle. She knew the chair ought to have struck terror into every part of her being. Large, hinged metal cuffs awaited her wrists, ankles, neck, and waist. Her throat burned from screaming, and she was almost grateful to find that rather than terror, the chair roused a cold, hard strength within her.

She still kicked and growled at the people, though she was relieved Little Master and Meathead were not numbered among them. Each blow she landed, and each blow she took before she fell was a small victory. One of the maidservants and one of the guards wrestled her back into the chair. The metal cuff clanked shut and the servant slid the bolt in, securing it.

The metal was spelled. The strange glowing scars hidden beneath her shoddily-made gloves burned. She cried out in pain, her vision shrouded by tears. Even through the veil of pain, she could feel the components of the enchantment, the way they attached to each other, creating a living thing. Words came unbidden to her mind. *Schmael. Uvam. Kavaeln.* Instinct, the wild part of her she'd carried since the fever bucked within her. She repeated the three words until they formed an unsung melody in her mind. The burning flared, the metal cuffs glowed orange suddenly, and then the pain eased, and the metal cooled against her skin.

To her surprise, the guards and maidservants were all backing away from her. One of the younger servants dropped the bucket she held, water sloshing over the stone

floor and draining through the grate. One of the guards held a dagger, but he too was unwilling to approach her.

Wello's lips tugged into a snarl-like smile. Good. Let them fear her. Never mind the instinct was sleeping now—the *miju* as inaccessible to her as it was to them. They had seen the ugly in her. They had seen the fever-beast that scared her tribe so badly they banished her and her father.

“You smell of fear,” she said.

The fragile tension in the room was broken by the arrival of a new guard. He was a younger man than the three guards already present. He started speaking rapidly to the servants and other guards, gesticulating orders to them. The room emptied until only the new guard and one aged maidservant remained. The guard communicated with the women through a series of rapid hand movements. The women responded in kind before picking up the bucket and hustling from the room.

The guard then turned his gaze to her. His eyes were a surprising grey color, and his hair fair, although not quite flaxen. The solemnity of his face—the dour downturn of his lips seemingly etched permanent creases between his mouth and his cheeks—made him appear impossibly old to her, like a statue woken from its stasis reluctantly.

He said, “*Jamá noham Galbennor. Giaben.*”

Wello's breath caught in her throat. His words were thick, and sluggish—heavily accented with Sciannese influence. But she understood them. He spoke one of the dialects of the Eantoli Collective; to speak the language aloud was punishable by death for ir Drogkarnor's people. But that wasn't the only strange thing. Only the Eantol Collective and their allies gave their children a full name only to call them by a

diminutive. Galbennor was the name of one of the Eantolean heroes of old. A storyteller. The diminutive form of the name was Giaben.

“*Tyrú? Turé noham?*” He asked. Although neither of the pronouns was the correct form, she understood the question. He wanted her name. As if she were stupid enough to be tricked simply because he spoke her mother tongue. She glared at him, hoping it looked fiercer than she felt at the moment.

His eyes looked strangely wet as his gaze traveled from her face to the shackles at her wrists, then her waist, and finally at her ankles. His face held none of the lechery that Meathead’s or Little Master’s had when they sized her up. Galbennor turned suddenly and emptied his stomach down the grate in the floor. Wello craned her neck over the side of the chair, straining to see. He heaved several times before straightening up, still green in the face.

“*Raspaece.*”

Wello’s forehead furrowed. The word was used to describe a period of calm before a storm broke out . . . or a period of respite from a storm. She supposed Galbennor actually meant *halfromme*, a term of comfort. But nothing he could say would have eased her mind. How could he possibly know her language? Who would have taught a soldier the forbidden words?

He pulled a dagger from it’s scabbard at his thigh and Wello flinched. “*Liebaejá. Dufree . . . vemmia . . . iln . . .*”

Wello blinked rapidly, trying to piece together his broken words. An apology, as if she could forgive him for what would surely happen next. The words for freedom and clothing and knife. Her defilement, or perhaps her death . . . she couldn’t parse what sort

of freedom he meant. She reached for that hard place of strength she had found when she first saw the chair.

The guard made quick work of cutting the remains of her dress free of her. Angry tears rolled unbidden from the corners of her eyes down her heated cheeks. Although Galbennor conscientiously avoided looking at her bared body, he bit the inside of his lip and continued to remove her garments.

When he began to unwind the cloth covering her silvery scars she found her voice suddenly. The words bubbled out of her mouth. “*Noa! Ir Drogkarnor leyhiem jamna. Mija fiera noa jamé sufre ne jaldn.*”

He looked at her with a scowl. He blinked rapidly, as if trying to translate what she was saying, but was coming up short of comprehension. He returned his attention to the cloth around her arms. As it fell away, he gasped. The strange scars illuminated the dark room—a pale echo of the star whose birth created them.

“*Mija?*”

Although she had said it first, the word still hit her like a blow to the face when he repeated it. She *was* one, and still she had never before admitted it out loud. Once—long ago—the power in her would have been called a blessing from the Allmother. But now it was a death sentence. Even among her own people, the *miju*, rare as they were, were looked at with fear and suspicion. Her father once told her of a young boy cursed with magic who was drowned by his own mother when she learned of his affliction.

She shook her head and repeated the denial over and again: “*Noa, noa, noa, noa . . .*”

“*Nihema karnia afi aje . . .*” His voice trailed off but she knew what he meant. She was amazed she hadn’t thought of it before. Legends spoke of the ability to create illusions and glamours capable of fooling even the most intimate acquaintances.

Galbennor laid his hand across her scar. She felt hot energy in the caress of his palm. The word *karnia* charged the air with the power of an incantation. It filled the small room, curled in the shadowed corners and clung to the walls. The darkness was all around her, so easy to reach out and touch. She spoke it aloud. “*Karnia. Jamá crewn sifen karnia esconne.*”

“*Karnia,*” Galbennor said it with her. The connection between his palm and her arm bound them together, unbreakable. The shadows pooled together on the floor and rushed towards her. The darkness siphoned itself from the ceiling and met with the pool. Out of the dark, two shadowy gloves formed themselves before her. The spectral gloves adhered to her arms, laying themselves over the bright scars.

Wello took a few panicky breaths. The illusion was so complete even she couldn’t see the difference between her own skin and the glamour. Galbennor pulled back his hand and took a few steps backward. He looked down at his own hand and Wello figured he must have felt the connection with her too.

The elderly maidservant reappeared in the doorway with a once-more water-filled bucket. She made a tutting sound as she set the bucket down and took the dagger from Galbennor. The woman began cutting the other strip of cloth free from her other arm. Galbennor made a gesture to his ear and said, “*Ejna noa . . . neha.*”

Neha was an older word for ear. The woman clearly had words, so Wello figured he meant to tell her the servant was deaf. Wello wondered suddenly if ir Drogkarnor

didn't know his guard could speak Eantoli. Surely, he must. But then why was it important that the woman was deaf? Wello gave a nod to indicate she understood.

The woman poured the bucket of icy water over her. Wello gasped for air, her lungs stung by the cold. She was still gasping when the woman began scrubbing at her with a fragrant bar of soap. The woman turned momentarily and motioned to Galbennor with her hands. He picked up the bucket and left the room.

After rummaging through the clinking contents of her apron pocket, the woman pulled out a jar with a clear, thick oil in it. She pulled the cork out with her teeth and poured the entire contents of the jar into Wello's knotted hair. The jar smelled of *ciawa* blossom and other floral scents she couldn't quite place. The woman kneaded the oil into her scalp, her knuckles working up a headache behind Wello's eyes.

The woman grunted and produced a wooden-tined pick out of her apron. She tugged at the tangles of Wello's tightly curled hair with a painful tenacity. Wello let out a few yelps as the woman jerked the pick against particularly stubborn knots. She balled her hands into fists and grit her teeth until the woman stopped forcing the pick through her hair.

Galbennor returned with the bucket, and the woman doused her with the chilly water again. He ducked out of the room briefly and came back with a deep rust colored dress made of a sheer gauzy material. After peeking back into the corridor, he said, "*A tuviá.*"

Wello felt fear coil in her gut. As soon as she saw the dress, she knew she would be treated to a particularly horrifying fate. She'd never been bedded and knew very little about how it went. She and her father had left her tribe when she was too young to learn

about such things, and her father was very circumspect about the subject thereafter. His words on the subject were simply that the enemy had no respect for their women and treated them poorly.

Galbennor's eyes watched her with sadness. Perhaps he could guess at her fear. She pleaded, "*Emjamiá.*"

"*Liebaejá.*" He apologized again. "*Ja noa k'to.*"

This time, Wello could forgive the guard. His eyes spoke of being just as trapped as she was. They held wetness and fear, and he swallowed hard, unable to look at her. She, too, didn't know what he could do to save her. "*Lieba tuví.*"

The guard turned away from her. His shoulders trembled, and he ran the heel of his hand across his face. He made no sound, and when he turned back, the gleam of tears was gone from his eyes.

"*Piae ía ir Drogkarnor noa himi. Ejne . . . suvstre.*"

Wello's eyes narrowed. *Suvstre* was a word from the old, higher tongue of legends. Very few people knew the old tongue. Her father had taught her some, but this word was unfamiliar. She wondered if the guard had misspoken. From the tone of his delivery, she assumed Galbennor intended it as a comfort to her. But how could a boy born from darkness and evil be anything but that?

"*Jáme brune?*"

Galbennor's lips stretched tight across his face. "*Yja.*"

Wello's skin tingled unkindly where the prince had run his finger along her abdomen. Tears sprang to her eyes but channeled the fear to where her nails dug into her

palms instead. Neither she, nor Galbennor spoke as the woman pulled the dress down over her head and smoothed it out across her breasts and hips.

She pulled a stick of kohl from her apron and warmed it over the sole torch lighting the room. In short order, she lined Wello's eyes, and painted her lips the color of bruised cherries. She pinched at her cheeks and dusted her forehead with finely crushed gold. The woman took a step back, wiping her hands on the folds of her apron. She looked over at Galbennor and the two exchanged some signals that Wello interpreted as approval of her appearance.

The guard motioned her to follow him, so Wello fell into step beside him. He waved off a couple of waiting guards, and lightly took hold of her upper arm. The power that had pulsed between them before was faint, but still present.

She held her head up and kept her back erect. This princeling may be able to violate her, and these people might claim her life, but she would not show them weakness. When they were alone in the corridor, Galbennor struggled to find the right thing to say to her. He stuttered through a string of broken words made incomprehensible by the emotion clogging his voice.

Wello took his hand and said, "*Deví. Adu holn.*"

He took a deep breath. After closing his eyes for a long moment, he said, "*Tuvá noa prashan.*"

He held a finger to his lips in case she didn't take the meaning of what he said—as if he needed to warn *her* the dangers of speaking Eantoli in front of anyone else.

Nayja. It went without saying.

They stopped in front of a worn wooden door that hung a little askance its hinges. Galbennor knocked lightly with his knuckles. The door opened a crack, and a man with a long neck and beady eyes poked his head through the narrow opening. The grey hair was sparse on his head and stuck out at odd angles as if a brush had yet to tame it. He croaked out a hoarse greeting. The guttural, consonant-laden Sciannese was harsh sounding compared to melodic Eantoli.

All of the gentleness Galbennor had shown towards her melted away as he conversed with the man. He produced a couple of gold coins and the man took them, shutting the door behind him. Wello's eyes bounced from the guard to the door and back.

The door creaked open again abruptly and the man thrust a bottle at Galbennor. The man handed the bottle to her as the door shut again. He motioned for her to drink it. "*K'ta maeya brunsh.*"

Wello took the draught in a single swallow and was glad she had. The liquid was thick and bitter—it had an unpleasant grit to it, like the sediment left behind by a river. But if it would make the pain less, she would drink her entire weight.

"*Lissé?*" Galbennor asked.

"*Lissá.*"

Chapter 19

Rorik lay awake listening to the floodwater gush beneath the ill-fitted wooden floorboards. The sound had its own rhythm as it passed. Mostly steady, but not wholly predictable. He let the sound soothe him and carry away some of the pain. His father was not so bold as to violate him here, with Vasialla sleeping mere feet away in her furs. But he was bold enough to pinch the tender skin of Rorik's inner thigh until bright spots clouded his vision. A new bruise for sure, though not nearly the worst he'd ever suffered.

Listening to the water, and gritting his teeth, Rorik reminded himself he could be brave. Not could—*was*. Hadn't he whispered his name to their host in defiance of his father? A secret he held. Physical strength was mercurial, but strength of will was interminable.

The star had disappeared from the sky, and the world felt bleak once more. Rorik stared out the rough-hewn window at the flat black canvas. Behind him, his father was finishing himself off as quietly as Rorik had ever heard him be. The pain lingered between his legs. He drowned it out with the lyrics of a softly-mumbled lullaby Elbeda used to sing. He held each word in his mind before letting it go to take hold of the next: *Eimikund lembdawis/ Tuvo demnei ir vulkrae zjorna/ Eilli ahui sostre tuvi a dawesken.*

#

Beneath the home, the swift current brought the smell of rain and dirt. Rorik rolled onto his back and inhaled deeply. Propping himself up on his elbows, Rorik looked across the room. Vasialla's back was to him, her body expanding and contracting with each steady breath. Next to Vasialla, Lyra slept soundly. Her normally pale face was flush and the spot her forehead creased with worry when awake smoothed out when she

slept. Her light freckling and straight, upturned nose reminded him of Elbeda. But her hair was flaxen and her face too round. How he wished she were Elbeda.

Beside him, his father stirred. But he too slept soundly now. Rorik stood up silently, only wincing slightly when he moved his freshly injured leg. He slipped past the thin curtain barrier and into the kitchen. On the other side of the kitchen, the home's second window captured another quadrant of the empty sky. Rorik stepped up onto his tiptoes and leaned out the window as far as he could.

Rain still dropped from the sky, but not in the oppressive sheets of the previous week. He liked the way each droplet felt like a gentle, albeit cold, kiss. A northerly wind swept the chill up off the water in the form of a silvery haze. One of the lines they'd left out bounced against the ledge. He retrieved a rag from where it hung on the wall and wrapped his gnarled hand. He drew in the line until he lifted a wiggling trout out of the water.

The fish was easily as long as his forearm, which surprised Rorik. His father always said that fish didn't linger in rapid currents long enough to take the bait off of the line. The floodwater, like the rain, must have slowed. They'd eat well today. His hands slipped over the trout's slimy surface as he tried to hold the flailing creature still. He wondered if it hurt to die this way—ripped from your home and thrust into a hostile environment ill-equipped for your survival.

Behind him, the curtain moved and the air shifted in the kitchen. Rorik's breath caught and he looked over his shoulder; Vasialla gripped a shawl over her nightgown. Rorik let the breath go as she approached. She picked up the heavy cleaver and brought

the handle down on the fish. The sudden stillness startled Rorik as much as the blow had. Vasialla leaned in and whispered, “No need to torture him.”

He wanted to ask her if the fish knew it was dying, but the curtain was flimsy, and his father close. Instead he patted the flank of the fish apologetically. Vasialla handed him a thin-bladed gutting knife,

“Help me prepare him for breakfast. I think we still have a few potatoes.” She said something else, but her voice was muffled as she went in search of the spuds.

Rorik applied pressure with his bum hand and slid the tip of the knife into the fishes belly. The innards spilled over onto the ground. Vasialla tutted and Rorik took a sharp breath. She locked her eyes on his face, her stern expression softened. Perhaps she knew—intuitively—that scolding came with fists in his home. He would hate for her to think he was afraid of her—she who had so casually defended him.

“Reason to fuss,” she said. Stooping, she scooped the guts up and tossed them over the stone rim of the fire-pit.

Even so, his heart took an inordinate stretch of beats to get the jitters out. He ran his finger along the slender ridges of the bones jutting out from the spine. He loved the different textures—hard, straight, crystalline bone and soft, fleshy fillet of fish. For a moment, he imagined he was the fish, laying on the dusty table of someone else’s kitchen, sliced from end to end—would his ribs lay bare the sensitive meaty bits that somehow made him who he was?

Sadness pooled in his chest, and his hands resisted the command to trim the edible cuts from the fish’s head. The fish was dead, but the wide, dark eyes stared up at him accusingly. He had the sudden urge to throw the fish back out the window. He didn’t

want to think about its eyes, its life, or the task of dissecting it. His hand shook as he set the flaying knife down.

“Are you all right?” Vasialla asked. She stood closer than he had realized.

He glanced back at where Lyra and his father slept. The curtain hung between the rooms, obscuring the sleeping area beyond. That cold dread crept up his neck to remind him he wasn’t safe, even here in Vasialla’s home. He decided to nod, knowing full well Vasialla would not be so easily convinced.

As he had expected, her mouth curved downward—another thin line on her wrinkled face. She stepped even closer, and slid the knife out from under his hand. With one hand, she pulled his head to her chest. The embrace felt all wrong. Not that he hadn’t seen people hug before—only that he was not someone who got held. His own arms floated untethered, unable to determine their proper place.

She leaned in until her tresses tickled his face, and whispered, “Be strong, Rorikund—when the storm passes, I intend to bring this matter to The Collective.”

A strange, not-wholly unpleasant pressure filled his chest and it took him a moment to realize he was fighting the urge to cry. But not from sadness. He pushed himself away from her chest, and stepped back to a safe distance. No threat of physical contact. He could feel her eyes searching his face, but his own resisted the command to meet hers.

She intuitively knew the question that strangled the hope out of him. “I may be an old woman. But my eyes and ears are sharp.”

The pressure released, and Rorik let out a ragged breath. Shame stirred him, unbidden but inescapable—and heated his face. Rorik’s eyes fluttered to her mouth

before he lost courage and averted his gaze once more. His mouth gaped, but with his father only feet away, he couldn't summon any words. Every instinct alighted with the warning.

“Hand me that pan, love.”

His arms moved rigidly—as if jerked straight out of a nightmare—to fetch the pot she asked after: a stone blackened from flames on one of its flat surfaces. She took it from him and placed the fish on its un-blackened side. He felt he had misjudged now, and longed to switch places with the fish.

#

The others awoke to the fragrant fish as it cooked. His father first, and then Lyra. He marveled at the way she stretched her whole body out—her mouth so wide with a yawn, it looked like she was trying to use up all the air for herself. Rorik felt a spasm of jealousy. She sauntered over to the kitchen, her eyes alive and singularly focused. “That smells delicious.”

Delicious. As if the fish had jumped from the flood to the stone plank just for her. He watched her tongue roll across her bottom lip. She looked over at him. “Get me some.”

“Get both of us some,” his father said. Lyra smiled coyly, as if she'd been chided for neglecting to mention him. Rorik turned away from them to hide how he had to bite his lip to keep his hands steadied as he retrieved the bowls. Two bowls.

Vasialla sectioned out the fish and silently slid a portion into each bowl. She ignored Rorik's outstretched hand and carried the bowls over to Lyra and his father. Her movements, which he first thought had a dancelike quality to them, felt different.

Reserved. She had no rhythm to her hips, and her wrinkles folded more deeply in on themselves. Rorik thought about her laying awake, listening to the sound of his father, finishing himself off. He thought about her watching him squirm as his father slid his hand under the waistband of his trousers. His stomach clenched. These four walls no longer provided a haven. If the flood water didn't reach up to his knees, he might have planned to leave that very minute. He didn't really have anywhere to go. But he was the problem and maybe if he left, the problem would disappear too.

Chapter 20

Dareund's cheeks flushed when Giaben stepped aside and he saw the girl bathed and dressed in a ridiculously flimsy dress. He was embarrassed that he *wanted* to look at her, despite her obvious discomfort. She stood with her arms wrapped around her waist as if she couldn't decide which of her intimate areas was more in need of coverage. Her eyes—the color of overripe plums—rested uneasily on his face.

“You can go,” Dareund told his guards. Rans and Hilden filed out of the door, but Giaben hesitated. He looked at the girl, then at Dareund. His eyes held an expression caught between a plea and a warning. Dareund dropped his gaze. He didn't need his guard to appeal to his conscience; he was already thoroughly disgusted with himself. More disgusted still that he would only purchase her another fortnight.

The chamber door closed and panic clawed at his lungs and gut. How could he even consider bedding her? She glared now. Her eyes spoke even if her mouth did not. He would forever after be this monster to her. The boy who thought he could play in a man's world. He gulped down a deep breath and patted the end of his bed with stilted, jerking movements.

She slid along the wall, as if it's firm presence at her back might protect her from what he had to do. Dareund blanched. He was as bad as his father for what he was about to do—the very least he could do was be honest about it. He didn't *have* to do this. He chose to do it because he was too weak to grit his teeth and watch her die. He didn't want to see her throat torn out by his father's hounds, or the life drain from her eyes as his father bent her spirit to his will. He was weak and he was a coward. Even now, he didn't have to bed her. He could defy his father and go to his death alongside the girl.

The girl sat, her back rigid and her face a carefully controlled mask, on the edge of the bed, pressed against the stone-carved foot-board. She was not weak.

“I wish I knew your name.”

Such a small thing: a name. Yet he felt even more the monster for not knowing. He kept talking, though not for lack of feeling slimy and foolish. “I’m Dareund.”

Her eyes were blank as the words tumbled out of his mouth. He pointed at his own chest and repeated his name. Whether she didn’t understand, or chose not to, the girl gave no sign of replying with her own. She had a steely power to her as she slid the strap of the red gown from her shoulder and let the dress fall to her waist. He wasn’t so naïve as to believe her willing. He saw the hard anger in her set jaw, and the way her hands formed fists by her side.

“I loved a girl once—Dynna. She was the daughter of one of my mother’s servants. A scullery maid. When she smiled, she got a dimple in one of her cheeks. She knew the filthiest stories—and liked to share them with me to make me blush. I miss the way she made me laugh.”

Dareund felt his own tears hot on his cheeks. “She’s nothing like you. She was soft and loved to tease me with flashes of her shoulders and smile when no one was looking. We would lay on the balcony when the adults were long asleep and talk about her home. She’d never been there, but she loved to make up details and inventions.”

“My father killed her.”

Really, the truth wasn’t so simple. Her mother had been caught trying to escape the palace with Dynna and several other servants in tow. His father had tortured them each in turn until their blood stained the hems of the attending courtiers. Dynna had

screamed his name more than once, and how her pleas cause his chest to ache. Even then he was a coward. He closed his eyes when his father hot coals into her wounds.

“I will try not to hurt you.”

He wiggled out of his tunic and laid it over the chaise near the bed. Fat tears glided down her face to her chin, and she bit her trembling lower lip. But still, she watched as he unlaced his trousers and stepped out of them.

#

When it was over, the girl cried so hard the entire bed shook. Her blood burned on his flesh—an indictment of his own capacity for evil. He wiped at the mess with his sheets as if he could remove his own guilt if he no longer saw it on him. His stomach roiled and he lurched for his chamber pot. The smell helped him purge the contents of his stomach. He whispered, “I’m sorry. I’m so sorry.”

His apology rang hollow in his own ears.

She rolled over so he could only make out the nubs of her backbone in the dim light. He retrieved his tunic and held it past her waist so she could see it. The garment would be ill fitting, but at least it would cover her. She sat abruptly and dove into it. Her head was through the neck opening before he could help her pull the hem down. She shoved him away hard. She was lithe, but her grace hid her strength. The back of his head slammed against the headboard. He pulled his hand away from his hair with blood-slicked fingers.

“Ouch,” he said belatedly. He immediately wished he hadn’t. Her eyes flashed violet and she slammed one of her fists into his chest one right after the other. “H-help!”

Giaben and Rans materialized in the doorway, both with weapons drawn. Giaben was holding his broadsword and Rans, his dagger. Rans dropped his dagger and dragged the girl off of him by her waist. He flung her to the ground, and drew his sword, pressing the tip into the tender skin of her throat. “Be still, wretch.”

“No, wait!” Dareund leapt from the bed. He knocked the flat edge of the sword away from the girl’s throat. Luckily, she had anticipated his movement and pulled back just enough that the tip passed without piercing the skin. “Don’t hurt her. I’m all right.”

“You did call for help?” Rans asked. His muscled flexed and relaxed under his taut skin.

“Yes, I merely needed your assistance getting her off of me. I didn’t mean for you to behead her.”

“Did you also need our assistance finding some clothes?”

Dareund straightened up, trying to look imposing while knowing no naked, flaccid man looked imposing. Rans didn’t necessarily seem intimidated, but he did say, “Your forgiveness, my lord. I often speak without thinking—especially when I’m about to do battle.”

“You have no need to do battle,” Dareund said. His posture faltered, his shoulders rounding. “I could actually use some help fetching another tunic. I have loaned mine to the lady.”

“Of course,” Rans said. He remained straight faced, but Giaben let out a small chuckle before he found his composure. Dareund looked at him curiously. He’d never seen the man express any emotion nearing joy. “I’ll attend to it.”

Rans sheathed his weapon and saluted before leaving. Giaben, too, returned his sword to its sheath on his belt.

“May I?” Gaiben asked, sweeping his hand towards the girl, who was still sat statuesque on the floor.

Dareund rushed to agree. “Yes, please.”

Giaben crouched down next to her and held out his hand. She slid hers into his and let him pull her up to her feet. She hovered near his side, as if the soldier was less threatening. His tunic dwarfed her, reaching below her knees and the sleeves past her fingertips. She looked like a child wearing her father’s clothes. The thought made him shiver. He’d seen his father make too many *klegen* not to believe in the permanence of his soul. He’d earned his place among the damned.

“Perhaps, my lord—if I may be so bold as to offer a suggestion—”

“Please do,” Dareund interrupted. He knew the speed of his response was unbecoming of an heir to the throne. But the stoic guard had never before offered any advice or comfort.

“Let this be the worst of her last fortnight. Your father will likely kill her when we march west. Is it too much to ask that you show her some small kindness for that short remainder?”

Dareund turned away from them. Even the soldier—a man who fought wars and spilled blood across the realm—was looking at him with disdain. Was he worse even than all that? Dareund replied, “I think that is only a small thing to ask, really. I hope it will be so.”

Chapter 21

“Hold up,” Drehn called out. His voice echoed through the summits, and Elbeda made a shushing noise out of habit, even though it came too late. Even eight years in the city couldn’t stamp the need for quiet, for caution, out of her. Her eyes darted to the nearest shadows.

Drehn took her by the shoulders and lifted her out of the dirt. She slumped against his chest. With her eyes closed, Elbeda imagined that it was Beaumond who held her close. Her ragged breath smoothed out, matching his in rhythm and timing.

“We gotta get up to that ledge,” Drehn said. “We’re not safe here.”

Elbeda nodded and pushed herself away from him. She grit her teeth as she scrambled up the slope once more. Drehn followed more closely behind, his right hand pushing against her calf, then her thigh as he urged her on.

Ulndur and Barfromme hauled her over the side of the ledge, then Drehn.

“Are you mad?” Elbeda asked between deep, uneven breaths. “Every *Drogkorian* agent in the Spine heard you.”

“I was worried for you.”

“I’m fine,” Elbeda retorted.

Drehn pointed to a clump of vomit clinging to her hair. “You haven’t kept down much food over the past few days.”

“That’s normal for a woman with child,” Elbeda said. Instantly her hand drew close to her mouth. She wasn’t sure why she’d been loath to admit it before—as if she weren’t truly with child until she spoke the words aloud. But having now said it, she felt as if she’d divulged an integral part of herself.

“You’re . . . Pregnant?” UIndur stroked his beard thoughtfully. For some reason, his pensiveness irked Elbeda.

“Yes.”

Drehn searched for some reason to disbelieve her. “But . . . We’ve been journeying for a near fortnight.”

“I’m pregnant, not an invalid.” Elbeda stood up, shaking the dirt from her skirt. She scooped the grit of the vomit and slid it free of her hair. The three men stared openly at her stomach, as if waiting for the bump to spring up before their eyes. “It’ll be a while before it shows, you know.”

“Forgive us,” UIndur murmured, “We are rough men, unaccustomed to the mysteries of women.”

Elbeda glanced over the ledge. The steep decline of the cliff made it possible to see almost all the way down to the valley floor, if dimly. The valley was still, and cliff barren. She looked back at Drehn, and said, “Where’s Peglerri?”

“He was right behind me.” Drehn leaned over the ledge, his eyes narrowed as he scoured the valley for some sign of their fifth member. “I could hear the rasp of his breathing.”

Drehn took a deep breath but Elbeda pressed her hand across his open mouth. “Don’t you dare holler again.”

“She’s right. Barre, Drehn, go back and find Peg. Drag his unfit ass up here. We’ll rest here a while before we make the final push for the summit.”

His eyes searched Elbeda out, as if waiting for her approval or protest. Elbeda shrugged and released her grip on Drehn. He and Barfromme unloaded their packs and

set the gear against the trunk of a tree nestled close to the next incline before lowering themselves, in turn—Drehn first, then Barfromme—back over the ledge. Elbeda lowered her knapsack to the ground and stretched her sore muscles.

“Where’s the father?”

“What?” Elbeda looked crossly at Ulndur.

He asked, “The child’s father, where is he?”

“Oh,” Elbeda swung her arms back and forth, internally cursing her careless slip. She didn’t want to talk about Scianne, Beaumont, and the part of herself she’d left there. “We’re not together. He’s not meant to be a parent.”

She tried to picture Beaumont balancing an infant on his lap as he worked at the wheel. She couldn’t really imagine it. She;d been a child when they first met, and yet he’d treated her as an adult—expecting her to cook and clean, and later to warm his bed. He didn’t begrudge him for it; she’d benefited greatly from his kindness. But still she couldn’t see him as a father.

“Does he know?”

Elbeda considered lying, but she didn’t really know why. So she said, “No. I left shortly after finding out myself.”

“Why?” Ulndur’s voice seemed to carry a vulnerability in it that made Elbeda uncomfortable. “Was he not good to you?”

“That’s not it,” Elbeda lowered her head, letting her dark tresses veil her face from him as she spoke. “I have an obligation, as you well know, that he wouldn’t understand.”

UIndur nodded, but she could see in his eyes that he didn't understand. She wondered suddenly, where he and the others were from. Anyone in the Eantol Collective would know of a mother's duty to resent her child to the Adumadorn. Sometimes UIndur and Drehn seemed to be well versed in the customary greetings and rituals of the various regions, but every now and then, she found them woefully ignorant. Perhaps they were from one of the border-towns—where strange blends of Sciannese law and Eantoli customs coexisted.

“Still, it doesn't seem right.”

Elbeda kicked a clod of mud-laden roots. She wanted to argue. The world wasn't right, how could he expect her to be? But she felt the sting of his rebuke, and didn't wholly disagree. She wondered how the conversation might have gone if she'd tried to have it. What if Beaumont packed up his things, left behind the wheel and amphora, and traversed this distance with her—would he resent her? Would he resent their child? She wasn't sure why she couldn't imagine a scenario where he was happy to leave his life behind and start a new one with her. Perhaps because in all the time she'd known him, he was reserved, stern and hardworking. He rarely smiled, and rarely pulled himself away from his work long enough to truly see her.

Elbeda was glad when UIndur busied himself with his pack, and the conversation fizzled out. She poured some water from her canteen over her hair, and wrung it out. She glanced up at the star which had reappeared shortly before they set out for the day. Strange how much it unnerved her at first, and yet now its presence comforted her. She settled down in the natural nook where the roots of a tree dug into the ground.

If she were still a child, back home trying to make sense of the world. She would have made up a story to tell little Rorik about the nascent star. But she was eight years out of practice and had no one to listen to her reinterpretations. Perhaps when her child was fully formed, she would tell the stories she knew once again, and the ones she created.

She drifted, imagining what newborn goddess might be looking down at her from a starlit sky.

#

She woke to low, panicked whispers. Blinking the sleep away from her eyes, she could make out three back lit silhouettes huddled near the ledge. Only three. Full wakefulness crashed down on her. She braced herself against the tree trunk and she slid up to her feet. Her feet were sluggish as she stumbled towards the men, half caught between sleep and fear of what she was about to discover.

“Did you find him?” She asked.

Too slow, Ulndur tried to shift his weight to block Peglerri’s severed arm. Elbeda closed her eyes and for a moment she thought she might hurl again. But she drew in a few deep breaths through her nose, and her stomach settled. When she opened her eyes, she asked, “What happened to him?”

Drehn poked at the dirt with a twig, Ulndur stared at the limp arm, and Barfromme examined the backs of his hands as if they were the most fascinating thing he’d seen. Elbeda snapped her finger, “Hey. What. Happened. To. Him?”

“We’re not sure,” Drehn said, looking up at her sharply. “This is all we could find.”

“What do you mean? All you could find . . . ,” Elbeda shook her head. “He might still be out there?”

“He won’t survive long without cauterizing the wound.” Barfromme spoke with a certainty of a man who’d experienced it, though he looked more or less intact.

Elbeda looked out over the valley. No plumes of smoke betrayed a fire. No cries of pain. Surely a man with his arm ripped-off would be in agony. “Where is the rest of him?”

“Don’t dwell on it.” Drehn said. He straightened up and touched Elbeda’s arm. “We’ll keep better watch as we move out.”

“We should move now.” Barfromme agreed.

Elbeda shook Drehn’s hand from her arm. “What if he’s still out there?”

“Whatever cleft his arm from his body is definitely still out there. We best be on our way.” Ulndur said it with a finality that brooked no argument.

The men broke apart in search of their packs. Elbeda trailed behind Drehn, until they were sufficiently separated from the group. Speaking quietly, Elbeda asked, “Drehn, shouldn’t we tell the others about—”

“No,” he interrupted before she could complete the thought. “You didn’t actually *see* anything. You might have heard a wild hare for all you know.”

“Don’t you think that’s a little optimistic considering Peglerri’s lost an arm and can’t be found?” Elbeda stepped in front of him, cutting off his route. “I definitely felt something watching me.”

“No. Don’t be hysterical. Any number of accidents might have befallen him.”

“You couldn’t find the body. Everybody knows *Klegen*—”

“*Klegen* are a myth.”

“You don’t know that.”

UIndur rounded on them, saying, “What are you two arguing about?”

“Nothing.” Drehn spoke before Elbeda had a chance to compose her thoughts.

But she knew one thing for certain: she was not hysterical.

“Not nothing. Earlier I thought I heard a large creature stalking me on the valley floor.”

“There was nothing there. I searched the area.”

“Enough. Whether or not a creature stalks us, we need to move with haste and vigilance.” UIndur said. Drehn shot her a dirty look, and Elbeda shrugged. At least she spoke her mind.

Chapter 22

Wello lay curled on her side. Every time the prince shifted or tossed in his sleep, it jarred her back awake. She cried, rather than tears of sadness, the angry kind that burned on her cheeks. A pillow cushioned her chest from her knees, but wasn't the same as the warmth and comfort of her father's embrace—what she truly craved.

She remembered when their village asked them to leave. Although she was six at the time, and too young to understand they were being exiled, her father had explained as best he could. He had sat her on his knee, and said, “you mustn't judge them too harshly when you're older. People have always, and will always fear those who are different.”

“Like how people make fun of Krynne ‘cause she can't see?” Little Wello had asked. She'd only just recovered from her fever, and still said the strange things she saw without restraint. “It's not Krynne's fault. The ropes on the back of her eyes are tangled and broken.”

Her father had tilted his head and given her a look she'd come to recognize as confusion. His eyes got distant, and his smile slowly turned to a frown. “No. Not like Krynne.”

“Oh. Like how?”

“Like you, Wellong'meta. The gods gave you a great gift when you recovered from your fever. You see and understand things the rest of us can't.”

“It's because you aren't really looking.” Wello hopped off his lap and placed her small, rag doll in her pack. “When will we come back?”

“Not for a long time—years.”

Years. She had no concept for time then. Their village had a Timekeeper but as a child, she thought him funny. The importance of the counting and the tracking hadn't linked up with the legends her people told of the warm, sunny days, and dark cold nights. At six, she only knew that years meant an unfathomable amount of time. "Why isn't *Ama* packing?"

"*Ama* isn't coming with us."

Wello wondered now if her mother would have warned her about *this* if she had come with them. Father never talked about sex, and she couldn't really remember a time in her youth when a man forced a woman to have sex. All father said was that if she was ever captured, she would endure great agony before her death.

He'd told her that when she was ten, after they'd hid in the underbrush of the *Tregana'ha* forest and watched an envoy of *ir Drogkarnor's* army marching past. The soldier's in the rear flanks of the parade held a large cage afloat on their shoulders. A heavy tarpaulin covered the cage, obscuring the occupants. But terrifying shrill, inhuman wailing filled the air. She and her father had stayed hidden for an interminable space of time after the soldiers passed, and when they moved again, her father said, "T'were better to take your own life than be taken captive by *ir Drogkarnor.*"

"Why? Isn't any scenario in which we live to fight another day the preferable option?" she had asked.

"No child. What difference can one life make in the face of evil? To survive him, you would have to warp the entirety of your being to his ways. Such an effort would come at the cost of terrible pain and eventually death."

Pain and then death, as if the process would be a quick, inevitable journey with only those two steps. Indeed she had experienced the terrible pain. She wasn't sure if it was possible to understand the pain she endured on that first night without having experienced it. She'd broken limbs, suffered illnesses, and lived through the loss of the person most dear to her. No combination of these types of pain compared to that night.

The worst part was looking at the prince's face every day following. Looking and knowing that he could have her again any time he wanted. So she dreaded her days and feared her nights. The only small joy she had were the moments when the soldier spoke to her in her own tongue. She was picking up some words in his language and knew when they were talking to or about her. But there was a tender sweetness to the sound of her home that soothed her.

But those moments were few.

"Wello?"

She hated the soft, apologetic way the prince said her name. She forced her body to unwind—first uncurling her fingers from their clutch on the velveteen pillow, letting out her breath, and then pushing her knees down and straightening out her toes like a dancer. And as she rolled over, she did not soften the anger holding her jaw clenched or wipe the shine of those hot tears from her cheeks.

Dareund, his royal rottenness, winced when he saw her face. Wello looked across the room where Giaben and the other soldier watched. How she would have loved to claw the prince's eyes out for the nerve they had to look, glistening and shadowed, as if *she* injured *him*. But unlike her father, Wello did believe that she could survive the demon's

son and fight another day. So she lay there, looking as hard as she knew how, while he played the victim.

She didn't understand what he said next but she caught the word "you" and so knew he meant to interact further with her. She wondered if he knew his guard could have communicated more effectively with her. She assumed he didn't, as Giaben only conversed with her when no other soul was around to hear him muddle with Eantoli.

The prince pushed himself up to his elbows, watching her with his ice-blue eyes. The idiot expected some response. Even if she understood enough of what he said to make a response, she wouldn't have. Silence afforded her a reticence she would have otherwise been punished for.

He spoke again, slowly, and gesturing with one hand. He looked abysmally clownish. He pointed to himself, and then her. With two fingers, he indicated that they were going to walk somewhere and she rolled her eyes. Another exciting day in the castle. He loved to take her around, as if she were the latest fashion needing to be shown off to the rest of court. She did find some amusement upon visiting the court for the second time—all of the fair women with their flaxen hair had attempted to mimic her nimbus of dark curls and the style of her dress. She laughed at the absurdity of these women spending so much time trying to imitate a look so unnatural to their dispositions.

Even after the prince stood, Wello remained laying on the bed a couple heartbeats longer. A small defiance. The prince didn't seem to care. He turned and said something to the soldiers. Not Giaben, but the other one slipped out of the room. He returned with a handful of servants. So quickly, Wello figured they lived an unenviable existence, forever milling about the corridor, awaiting their lord's every whim.

The servants produced a tunic for Dareund and a gown for her. More silk and embroidery, beads and golden thread. The gowns they wore here verged on extravagance that even her people's matriarch, the *Adumadorn* had better taste than to wear. Wello told herself that although she had only seen the woman once when she visited the tribe before Wello and her father left. Wello only remembered two things: the woman was pale and sickly, even then, and she wore the most simple home-spun traveling dress that Wello had not believed she was their matriarch for nearly the whole visit. People said the previous *Adumadorn* wore more resplendent garments, but the new one eschewed them in favor of practical garb.

Wello scooted off the bed and submitted herself to the serving girls. They straightened her shift before wrapping the gown around her. One of the girls began buttoning her into the dress with nimble fingers. So many buttons Wello wondered if the girl would have blistered fingers by the end or if she had callouses built up already.

Dareund's clothes were so much simpler. The servants pulled off the old tunic and then pulled a new one over his head. Wello didn't wonder why men were more productive in Scianne. Woman spent so much time dressing, primping, undressing, rubbing on this oil or that—they didn't have any time for the running of a country.

Her face must have worn her thoughts near enough, because Dareund chuckled when he looked over at her. She tightened her fists to fend off the urge to kick him. She repeated her mantra over in her head until she was calmer; live to fight him another day. Without his guards and his servants, she knew she could best him in any fight. She had trained daily with her father in the use of swords, bows, maces, and hand-to-hand combat. Live, and she would fight him another day.

#

They weren't going to court. Wello was glad when she glanced behind her that both Giaben and the other man looked equally perplexed. She wasn't entirely sure how inner-castle travel occurred, but she thought it did not often involve moving a statue, then a rug, going through a trap door, and then down a widely spiraled staircase into the belly of Geon.

The stairs went down endlessly. She could tell they were carved with care originally, but had decades ago—perhaps centuries—fallen into disrepair. The edges of more than a few steps crumbled and now lay jagged where they were once straight. And the torches every twenty to fifty steps wore their years of service like blackened halos burned into the wall around their heads. The deeper they descended, the more completely the aroma of musty earth permeated the narrowing passage. Here they could walk but two abreast, but soon they would need to slide into a single line.

She was of two minds about this; she could try to shoulder her way in front of the prince as a petty matter of pride and hope this wasn't a life-ending offense, or she could fall into step behind him and not confront the unknown first and perhaps foolhardily. At the last second, she decided and slid behind him.

They came to a halt just outside a gilt archway. The prince pointed to a tapestry on the wall—a portrait of a disturbingly pale woman with white hair held an orb in one hand and a book in the other. Her eyes were winter frost and her flesh-pink lips curled upwards in the corners as if she withheld a secret from them. *Navja*. At first, Wello thought the tapestry was a portrait of one of his relatives—the woman bore a striking resemblance to the prince, and only aristocrats commissioned portraits.

But Wello understood the name the prince said. Sorea, a *mija*—the last *Amija* before the fall of the entire order of sorceresses. What good did the secret do her when *ir Drogkarnor*'s army came, and took this city by force? Not enough good.

Although the legend of the last priestess wasn't a popular oral history in her village, she'd heard it recounted a few times by her father once they'd entered their exile. Sorea had fallen in love with one of the male sorceresses named Frandsel. She taught him in secret because her sisters in the order did not approve of his aggressive casting. Rather than holding a balance between himself, the *miju*, geon, and the life force of all other beings, Frandsel voraciously learned all the arts and hoarded power he ought to have channeled back into the three other cardinal elements.

Sorea ignored the warnings of her sisters even though she saw the destructive path Frandsel chose to walk. He began to challenge the way Sorea and the other *mijai* recruited and taught the younger generation. When she wasn't around, Frandsel corrupted the young and shared rituals they weren't yet able to understand or control. As time passed, his whispers spread until more in the temple aligned with him and fewer followed the core teachings of the original *mijai*. Eventually Frandsel realized he could not convince Sorea to change her loyalty to her heritage, and so in one last attempt to coerce her, he and his revolutionaries attacked the temple.

Wello's father had trouble explaining the events. Paired together was destruction and liberation. In attempting to liberate the access to magical texts and rituals led instead to the destruction of it. Sorea had guardianship of the *Mijudeen*—the original preternatural guide, and knew that she could not cave to her lover and throw the world

into imbalance. She gave the tome to one of her acolytes, a young woman Wello had since met in the otherworld named Fieran.

Fieran died protecting her entrusted book. And her blood sealed the book to her and carried it from its corporeal form and into that realm betwixt life and the after. Perhaps, Wello thought that sacrifice might have influenced the one Sorea later offered. In the final confrontation of the two lovers, amid the burning temple and the groans of the dying, Sorea used the most powerful, extreme type of incantation a sorceress could: the entirety of her lifeblood. She cut her palms and scrawled the spell in wide smears as she spoke the words that changed the world. Nobody but Sorea and Frandsel knew which words. She didn't stop writing or chanting until death came and transcribed her very body into the spell.

In that last drawn breath, she lobbied the only partial victory left at her disposal. She took away the ability of all people to read until the world could be returned to balance. Some speculated that she intended only for an intellectual darkness to befall Geon, but that her own power imbued the spell with an unintentional consequence. The darkness became a literal, physical one as well. And just as the words remained on the pages of the scrolls and leather-bound grimoires, the sun and stars and moon remained in the sky, but the people lost the ability to discern them. They might stare into the firmament and the page alike for eternity and never unravel the knowledge or light shrouded by the spell. Crops would yield in their natural season, the warmth and wind and rain pass in natural succession, only people existed out of the natural as punishment for their transgression against it.

Wello wondered if that was the same story Dareund tried to tell her now. More likely he had heard another, different story. Perhaps Sorea faced an equally harsh choice in his story but came out the selfish villain rather than a tragic figure forced into martyrdom. Wello didn't like the way this thought humanized the prince. Part of her, where the anger waited for the moment to spring awake, knew she would have cut herself open and bled words to punish Dareund for what he'd done to her—if only she knew them.

#

Wello gasped.

On the other side of the arch, the narrow, staired hallway opened up into a domed chamber. And around the circumference of the room, shelved walls held scrolls upon scrolls upon tomes upon tomes. More books than she could have imagined even in her fevered dreams. Although she knew numbering existed beyond her fingers and toes, she wouldn't have known the term for such a plethora of pages.

A tear rolled down her cheek. She abruptly swiped it across her face, unsure why it leaked from her eye in the first place. A primordial, nonlinguistic instinct squeezed her chest and gave permission to her watering eyes. They fell and fell and she couldn't wipe them away fast enough. She was aware—in a distant way—that the men watched her as she crumpled to the ground.

Unfathomable years had passed while this chamber remained secreted away in the earth. Each of these documents held a world forgotten and ready to be rediscovered. Her people lived in these pages. Firelight from their torch lit up the heavy cloud of dust that responded to their presence. That dust gave the air shape as it ebbed around them.

Wello's throat ached as she trailed her fingers through the gold-dusted air. *Mijunuam* rode on the dust, waiting for her to tap it.

She pushed Dareund's hand away when she saw he had reached down to help her up. Rans stiffened, and the veins in his neck strained against his skin. Wello did not doubt that he would run her through with his blade if Dareund allowed it. Giaben didn't look at her. His grey eyes searched the walls. Although his usual frown softened, it didn't wholly disappear. His brows pressed in against the center of his forehead, creating a tiny ridge there. She couldn't quite explain it, but his expression alleviated some of the weight of the moment. She wasn't the only one who felt the magnitude

Wello picked herself up from the ground and swatted at the debris on the lengths of her skirt. The prince continued to speak as he approached the nearest shelf. His hands ran across the spines. Wello shuddered, remembering the hot places where his hands ran across her body. Dareund brought a book over to her. The time-yellowed pages were held together in a black leather portfolio. His fingers fumbled with the string tie, and then leafed through the pages.

Partway through the search, Wello realized she leaned over his shoulder to look at the passing pages and took a step back. This wasn't the first book she'd seen after all. She couldn't read them, so they were pretty much the same.

Dareund passed a loose leaf over to her. A beautiful ink illustration portraying a luminous woman sitting in the sky among the stars holding congress with a young man standing on the edge of cliff filled the entirety of page. Wello brushed her hand over the sheet's surface, feeling the grooves left behind by the artist's quill. The illustrator must have spent countless hours on the piece, capturing the inflection of her eyes and the

curvature of his muscles. Her hand still pressed the page when Dareund said two words she understood—“Oldred” and “Mena.”

Names she knew from bedtime stories. She looked again at the drawing and thought this made sense, although plenty of the Eantoli mythos involved the Mena either in her human form or as that of the lesser light. Meranee may have died before claiming Eantol’s throne, but she continued—according to legend—to mentor and guide the people as an ascendant god. This illustration could have been depicting a number of them.

Dareund handed her another sheet, this one full of writing. The symbols swam across the page, and trying to focus on them made her eyes water and her head ache. She blinked and blinked, but couldn’t make the words still on the page. Dareund’s hand traced a pattern on the parchment, but Wello couldn’t discern what he tried to show her. He spoke too fast for her to pick up any of the words. Wello looked over her shoulder at Giaben. His eyes watched Dareund, curious and bright. He looked over at her and smiled.

Dareund crinkled the paper, drawing Wello’s concentration back to him. He took her hand and dragged it to the spot on the page. Her hand clenched, but he was stronger. He moved her finger in a looping motion, tracing a symbol on the paper. For a brief moment, she thought she could hold the word in her mind—seeing the black ink steady on the page beneath her fingertip. She snatched the sheet from him and held it closer to her face. But as quickly as the symbol had appeared legible, it slid away from her sight, back into an untangle-able knot of ink.

Chapter 23

Giaben steadied his hands at his side, touching the tips to his thigh like an anchor searching for and finding the ocean floor. People spoke of the Third Devastation as a total destruction of Vlaennya, Eantol's capital city. Yet here Gaiben stood, certain this was the *mijudaeni* temple located in Vlaennya. History rewritten so easily—an entire city's ruins hidden beneath the glory of another—like grass growing over an aged grave. How he longed to be alone.

Beneath his feet, the dirt gave way to a delicate, now cracked mosaic of mirrored tiles and precious stones. Time had pried some free of their casings, but most remained glittering through the grime and debris of leaves, paper, and roots jutting through the spaces between. He imagined a scene so visceral he could feel his knees hitting the ground, the grit between his fingers as he brushed the rubbish aside and pressed his forehead to the cool-stone surface. He would invoke the name of the great goddess. And in the moment, Giaben thought it seemed possible that Allaenne might answer—like in the legends of old.

But he wasn't alone. Rans stood close enough to him that Giaben could smell his musty odor. Taking deep breaths of it helped keep Giaben grounded. As always, Rans appeared underwhelmed. He stood at attention, but his eyes wandered around the room, passing over each artifact as if deeming it unimportant before moving on. Giaben wondered what Rans would say if he witnessed the secret fantasy Giaben just played inside his mind.

“Look! Look here,” Dareund said. He wasn't speaking to Giaben, yet the urgency in his voice drew his attention. The First Son hunched over the book he and Wello held

between them. With his free hand, he was underlining something Giaben couldn't see. "These words repeat in this order here, and then again here."

The muscles in Giaben's back tightened. He thought back on the only time he held a written text in his hand. He'd squinted at the shifting ink, but couldn't make any sense of it. All he'd achieved was a headache that lasted for days. He wished he stood right behind them, following Dareund's finger as he mapped out the page in a way no other person could.

Every child living in the Eantol Collective heard the story of Sorea's curse. Sorea foretold that when magic returned to the land, one would be born with the ability to decipher the ancient texts, a book would return to the world that could unlock the curse she left written in her blood. Most people believed these cataclysmic events would only happen once, but his *amá* used to say that the curse could be lifted any time.

She thought the magic already existed, and that each generation birthed one child who would be able to read. He remembered laying in her lap, looking up through the veil of her flaxen hair as she told him all that was missing was the courage to act. Magic alone couldn't change the world. *Ir Drogkarnor* brought the darkness, Sorea only revealed what was already there. And light couldn't fully return to Geon until he died. Courage to face a man who lived for centuries on blood and magic knowing thousands had tried and failed to kill him.

Dareund was still speaking. "And I think this one here means Meranee, or Mena. See how it appears right under the illustration of the two of them?"

Wello looked over her shoulder and Giaben met her gaze. Her forehead creased just above her nose, and her eyebrows crowded in on it. Giaben felt a genuine smile

pulling at his lips. He hoped that the expression would ease some of her anxiety, but her back remained rigid as she turned back to Dareund. He marveled at her strength.

After he watched soldiers torture and kill his mother—after they tortured him—he couldn't meet a soldier's eye or be alone with one for close to a year. Jos found Rans, and over time, Giaben came to trust him. Still, that fear got the better of him on occasion. But Wello stood close to the boy who wronged her without flinching. Maybe she had the courage his *amá* proclaimed necessary.

Giaben took a breath and his shoulder's slumped, his arms slid out of attention. Rans glanced at him with a disapproving scowl. But the First Son didn't even skip a beat of his discussion of language with Wello. This didn't surprise Giaben. Nearly two months of protecting and escorting Dareund had shown Giaben that the boy was his father's opposite in most regards. He didn't care for formalities, or displays of power. He possessed compassion and remorse. Naturally, his privilege allowed him to move through court without the fear that tightened its grip on Giaben every time they attended.

"If I can figure out how to break down the sounds of these two words and match them to the letters, I can apply the sound to other words that these letters appear in," Dareund said. Wello studied the page, enrapt. Perhaps she understood better than he originally assumed.

Giaben flexed his muscles and took a few steps away from his post. Rans inhaled audibly. Giaben ignored his friend and approached a desk that sat a few paces away near the wall. The desk's surface was angled such that Giaben could see the bottled ink resting in a tray that ran along the bottom edge and the stack of parchment propped up in the hard writing surface. Black ink stained the lower portion of the papers. One of the

inkwells laid on its side, long ago bled out. The traces left dried onto the wooden tray and the parchment. Giaben rubbed the paper between his first two fingers and his thumb. He liked the texture. Rough, and yet fragile. One wrong move and the sheet would rip, fray, rumple in his hand.

Beyond this one desk, others sat at regular intervals along the wall. Each one uniform in appearance. Minus the spilt ink, they were entirely interchangeable. Surely the people who once sat at each were not. Giaben never before questioned the idea that legends were peopled only by the named characters. Sorea, Frandsel, and Fieran alone grappled at the end of the Third Devastation. But that wasn't true. Countless *Mijudaen* fought and died in the battle. The sorceress who sat at this desk, who knocked the inkwell over when caught in a moment of surprise, died too. Was her part any less critical than that of Fieran?

Giaben looked again at the First Son and Wello. One with magic, and one was learning to read; the two characters sure to be named in legends to come if they found that courage to confront Dareund's father. And he, Giaben, would be counted among the unnamed, forgotten pawns.

The thought felt distant, as if narrated from a long silent voice in the back of his mind. The same voice he'd ignored in order to kill his kinsmen in battle. A voice that slowly stopped interjecting over time the more objectionable his own actions became to him.

He felt a sudden jolt of excitement, a vindication of the hope he felt when first he looked upon the star. In his gut he thought the star an omen of good, of changes to come.

Rans's feet hurt from the night's watch. Being a guard in the palace wasn't all plush and easy, the way some of the soldiers talked about it around the fire pit. The beds provided were too soft, and even Reena's warm body couldn't coax him to sleep during the nights. Between the riots, and the re-emergence of that star in the third-quarter each night, the world was off-kilter and he just couldn't settle.

But Giaben weighed most heavy in his mind. What was he going to do about Giaben? He hadn't found the voice to confront him yet, but he knew what he'd heard. Weeks past, he had stood outside the door to the ceremonial washing chamber and heard Giaben speaking the forbidden tongue to the First Son's consort. A crime punishable by death—Giaben's if he reported it, or his own if he did not. All his life he had been tasked with caring for Giaben. The command became tantamount to his allegiance to the High Lord. An impossible decision he could only make at the expense of one of his loyalties. A decision he still couldn't make.

Now they were all in a hidden chamber full of relics from the old world. Surely the High Lord knew of the chamber's existence, but the entry was so out of the way and obscured that Rans could only imagine they were not supposed to be here. Yet no one else in the chamber seemed the least bit concerned. Dareund and the girl huddled around the book, talking about words and repeating symbols. Giaben drifted away and gradually came to rest with one hand on a wooden desk against the chamber's walls.

Rans maintained attention. The discipline of the stance eased some of the turmoil he felt inside. When he wandered, he did so only with his eyes. He allowed himself to gaze at the strange assortments of objects he didn't have names for. Which of these artifacts qualified as a book versus a scroll eluded him squarely. In the center of the

chamber, suspended in the air through a series of stone parapets, a carved sphere hung. The surface had ridges and smooth stretches, as if he might experience every sensation if his hand dared caress it. But he could live without doing so.

The High Lord had scholars to unlock the secrets here. When *he* deemed it appropriate, his scholars would disseminate the information to the likes of him. A soldier's world consisted of swords and battle, not lore. Rans' eyes slid over the sphere and up to what was once an oculus. The stained glass barely clung to the rim of the opening, and a tangle of roots alone held the dirt clods from pelting the ground they stood on.

Time and insects had rotted the wooden shelves and many of the desks slagged in the middle—one sturdy look away from collapse. Rans didn't like the stillness of the air. He thought he could even smell the stillness, as if one smell had been stuck too long underground and now it lived there. But his discomfort didn't matter. The First Son wished to be here, and so Rans waited for his lord's whim to pass.

He considered telling the First Son, rather than the High Lord, of Giaben's conversation with the girl. The First Son didn't seem the type to go loping people's heads off. But the First Son was merely an emissary for the High Lord, and as such would surely tell his father. For a moment, that thought appealed greatly to Rans. He would have done his duty to his liege-lord, but not be directly responsible for the consequences when the High Lord found out. Relief.

But he knew the relief was illusory. He'd feel his friend's blood every time he rubbed his hands together. Sleeping through the night, undisturbed would be a life sentence, no matter who became his new bunkmate. Perhaps eventually, even Reena's

embrace would lose its warmth. She may love him, but she cared for Giaben also. If her eyes changed, losing that playful inflection when they fell on him, Rans wasn't sure he would withstand it.

So instead, he carried the secret a little longer.

Chapter 24

The rain stopped as suddenly as it had started. One minute, Vasialla's home shook as if *Vu'leg* himself beat the ground upon which it stood, and then stillness slipped in and all was calm. Rorik found the sound of every movement and breath so unnerving in that new silence left in the wake of the storm. The floorboards creaked with every footstep. Every footstep adding to the urgency he felt to escape.

His father stood by the open door, watching the serene water, as if his gaze hastened its recession. Any day now he would tell them to pack their things—they were going home. Back to that prison of isolation and pain. Rorik couldn't bear it any more than he could bear Vasialla's conspiratorial gazes whenever they were alone.

She was sitting with Lyra now, braiding her flaxen hair into a coil around her head. Lyra giggled, holding up the looking glass to admire the new style. Rorik felt a strange lightness when she smiled as she watched her transformation. The resentment he felt towards her softened, if only slightly, as he couldn't remember the last time he'd seen her happy.

"The water's receding quickly," his father said. He looked back over his shoulder at Rorik, who lowered his eyes to avoid the gaze. He knew well what was in store for him once they were hidden away again. He looked down at his arms; the bruises he'd arrived with had faded, and it no longer hurt to walk or sit. Although he carried on as though nothing fazed him, he was scared. Scared that if he went back home, the little part of him borne of hope might die.

"We should be able to leave in a day's time," his father said.

Lyra straightened up, as if freshly aware of the world beyond herself. “But I like it here. Vasialla does my hair wonderfully.”

Rorik didn’t dare voice his support even though his heart jumped when she spoke.

“Vasialla has more important things to do than braid your hair, child.” Their father took a step back and swung the door shut. “Another few inches of rain, and your home may have been flooded.”

“*Derniel* watches over us,” Vasialla said as she set the brush down on the stump that served as a nightstand alongside her bed. *Derniel’s* legend wasn’t his favorite; he found it almost unbearably sad. Two lovers’ sacrificing each other in the face of imminent war—reunited only in deaths separated by decades of longing and searching.

Rorik’s father grunted. Rorik couldn’t tell if it indicated disagreement, or if his father was simply a disagreeable man. Either way, Vasialla let the moment pass before saying, “There’s no rush to leave. You’ll need a place to sleep while you rebuild.”

“No.” His father’s voice was low and even, but Rorik was familiar enough with the tone to know it bode ill for them all. “We have lived on your kindness long enough.”

“Nonsense.” Vasialla’s hand trailed through the air as if waving away an apparition. “It’s been my pleasure to have children in the house.”

The last word lingered in the air, as if she left some secret ending unspoken. Rorik’s father sensed it too. His eyes narrowed, slipping from Rorik to Vasialla and back. Vasialla’s expression was smooth—no sign of trouble on the horizon, no indication she had any knowledge of Rorik’s burden. The same could not be said for him. As soon as his father’s eyes rested on his face, Rorik betrayed himself. His breath caught, and his eyes sought out refuge from his gaze.

His father said, “hmm. You have certainly spoiled them for attention.”

“Perhaps.” Vasialla said just as carefully. “Children need to be spoiled every now and again.”

The conversation—the real one they were having—was all innuendo and posturing. Rorik could hear the edge in his father’s voice, and see the unyielding stubbornness in Vasialla’s stance. She stood with her supple arms on her hips, her feet planted firmly under her shoulders. His father fingers tapped the side of his leg where he kept his knife holstered.

“Spoil a child, and it becomes unruly and disrespectful.”

“He or she?”

“He.” The retort was clipped.

When his mother lived still, his parents would pass the night in violent fits of howling and hurling whatever was handy at the other. Elbeda told him not to worry, their fighting paled in comparison to the fights of the Mother Goddess *Allaenne* and her father *Ik’yempoam*. Elbeda said the thunder was their voices shaking the clouds, and lightning was the collision of stars threw against Geon. Rorik thought it made the gods seem tedious and mundane.

“Don’t be cross, Vasia,” Lyra interjected, her plea a little desperate, a little naive. She looked so young, her legs tucked under her body. Her flushed cheeks and wide eyes convinced him that age wasn’t necessarily a chronological thing people pretended it to be. She was nearly two years his senior, but he couldn’t remember ever having the voice to argue with impunity with the adults. “Father spoils us well.”

Rorik felt as if invisible strings tethered him in collapsing triangle between Vasia and his father. Both of them tugging at him, even if neither looked when they made their barbed comments. His father's hand fell suddenly on the nape of his neck, heavy and unnaturally feverish. "I have provided a good life, a safe life for my children."

"You insult the Mother Goddess herself. She blessed your late wife to be more fertile than the rest of our village folk combined. But you've lost more than half your seed to disease and death. Boldly, you brought one sick child to my home, and another marked by cruelty."

Rorik squirmed as his father tightened his grip. Five needling fingertips burrowing into his flesh, chasing the light from his vision.

"You may be *adumadu* in our village, but you have overstepped your bounds."

Vasialla drew a knotted wooden club from behind her pillows. A stubby, inelegant weapon, but Rorik did not doubt its effectiveness. "You may leave, but the children will stay until the council convenes and rules on the matter."

Rorik couldn't picture Vasia leveeing the weapon against his father. How could someone who hummed long-forgotten lullabies and rubbed *chasma* on his wound's so tenderly he didn't feel her touch have enough violence necessary to match his father? Rorik invoked *Kellea*— fighting mother—to give Vasia her strength—the strength of the spirits of mothers passed away in the act of protecting children. He didn't pray on his own behalf, but rather that his father would not harm her who had shown his compassion.

"You dare order me around. They are *mine*."

Rorik's father pushed him to his knees in front of Vasia, and asked, "Have you told this woman lies about your treatment, *duja*?"

Rorik froze. The small place his courage lurked pleaded to say he had, but the words wouldn't come to his lips.

"He did no such thing." Vasia spoke for him. "He didn't need to."

His father's shadow towered over him. He'd known this wouldn't last; an embrace always leaves a cold sensation to prick at the skin. White knuckled hands full of dirt and jagged nails couldn't tear the right words out, even as his father commanded, "Tell her the truth."

Vasialla hoisted the club over her shoulder, pale underarm flabby with withered muscle. Her cheekbones and forehead shone with firelight, but her deep-set eyes pooled darkness. Fierce, inhuman.

His father stepped past him, shoulder's hunched forward, his chin pointing him on the path to confrontation with Vasia. Rorik snaked his hand around his father's leg, and spoke the same broken words that had failed to move him to mercy that first time, "*Apa, please.*"

Lyra howled as the two adults struggled over the weapon. No thunder rumbling in the sky, no lightning cracking in the mountains. Just grunts and sharp exhales, skin on skin. Vasialla met Rorik's gaze and gave him permission in the old tongue, "*tuvya'gielma kepe.*"

Rorik tripped over the dirt floor as he tried to find his footing, but flee, he did. Angry words his father's shouted words lost their voice in the rush of the door opening, the blood pounding in his ears, as Rorik dove into the knee-deep waters.

A loud crack split the stillness as Rorik waded out into the frigid water. It splashed against his face as he hit all fours, and half floated-half crawled through the

standing water before he could find his feet. And even after he rose, his water-laden clothing attempted to drag him down. The air tasted icy as he gulped down breaths laced with the water.

A wave pushed against his calves. He twisted to glance back at Vasialla's home. His father stood stark against the flat horizon of water glowing in the starlight. His face was darkened with her blood, and he wore an inhuman snarl as he stomped through the water towards Rorik.

New urgency surged through Rorik's muscles, but it wasn't enough to save him. His father overtook him swiftly, clamping his hand around the back of Rorik's neck and forcing him into the water. Rorik beat his fists against the sodden earth, desperately trying to lift his head above the water.

One thought broke through his panic: maybe dying wouldn't be terrible. Rorik gave in to the darkness pressing in from the periphery. Like *Fraedda* drinking up the ocean to reveal land beneath, Rorik opened his mouth and let the murky water clog his nose and throat. Perhaps this was the only way he'd ever know true freedom.

Chapter 25

Dareund knew the anger and pain between them wasn't gone, but since he had taken Wello to the hidden library, the tension had eased. He watched as she leafed through one of the two books they brought back to his chambers. Her violet eyes had barely lifted from the page all day. Dareund wondered if she, too, could keep the words focused and still in her mind. When he leaned over to see what page she looked upon, she would clutch the book to her chest and frowned at him. So he let her sit alone with her book, in the chair near the fire. He stood by a hearth for moment, until his skin was hot to the touch, then wandered over to the balcony.

In the far corner of the room, to the right of the door, Rans and Giaben held a heated conversation. Rans gestured passionately towards the girl and the book while Giaben crossed his arms and spoke low, sharp words. Dareund didn't mind; they argued a lot, but functioned just fine despite it.

A loud rap at the door brought everyone to stillness. Dareund motioned for Wello to lower the book from sight, then met Giaben's gaze and nodded. Giaben brushed past Rans and pulled the chamber doors open. A castle messenger in formal livery stood with a guard on either side of his narrow shoulders.

"I carry a message for your grace, First Son of our High Lord."

"Speak," Dareund said in a small voice. He knew before the messenger opened his mouth that the time had come.

"Our High Lord requires your presence in his chambers. You are to bring the slave." The messenger jutted his chin in Wello's direction. She seemed impervious,

examining the stitching on her skirts as if bored. Dareund's fingers curled into fists at his side, and breath slipped in and out of his lungs too slippery and quick.

"Carry this message to our High Lord," Dareund said. "I will present myself and the slave before him presently. We need only to change into the proper finery."

"Hear." The messenger said, then turned sharply in his polished boots, and strode away. Dareund felt as if someone reached down his throat and squeezed his stomach. Had he bought her so little time? A fortnight of pain and imprisonment didn't seem much like a reprieve. Dareund looked over at Wello, who seemed unaware of the edict; her face once again found the pages of the book irresistible.

Rans spoke first, harsh in contrast with the silence, although not intentionally so. "You knew this day would come swiftly, lord."

"I know." Dareund said.

"There will be plenty of other girls—more willing, too." Rans continued, despite a hissing sound from Giaben.

"What if that was Reena?"

"She's not," Rans retorted.

His voice carried over Dareund's inquiry, "Who's Reena?"

Giaben didn't respond, but he held Rans's accusatory gaze with impunity.

Dareund cleared his throat, breaking their silent conversation. "I don't want her to die."

"Her life is not yours." Rans said, "If it is our High Lord's will, we should be pleased to carry out her sentence."

Giaben's fists pressed against his thighs, clearly betraying his disagreement, but he held his tongue. Instead, he pivoted and approached Wello. She glanced up at him from the book, and seemed to understand when he said, "It's time, come."

She gently closed the book and laid it on the arm of the chair. She said a word in the forbidden tongue, and Rans stiffened. Dareund motioned for him to relax. Wello was going to die anyways; he saw no sense in punishing her further.

"What did she say?" Dareund asked, unsure why he got the impression Giaben understood. He thought maybe the soldier's compassion or the way he tenderly held one of the slaves hands.

Giaben shook his head, saying, "I don't know, my lord."

"Shame," Rans said through grit teeth.

"Would you like to say something?" Giaben asked in a voice much more calm than the fury in his eyes.

"Stop bickering," Dareund commanded. "We must go before my father. Have the servants dress Wello. I'll dress myself."

#

The walk to his father's chambers never felt so long. Reluctance weighted his feet, and the corridor stretched ever onward as though it lead to the realm of the gods. Giaben and Rans kept perfect time with each other's steps, forging the way. Hilden and Wollmard kept a few-paces distance between themselves and Wello, who walked just behind Dareund.

Her unnatural calmness only goaded his anxiety. He couldn't imagine she didn't know this was the path to her death—or worse. He'd seen his father do it: pale, slender

fingers arched over the tender flesh exposed between the breasts; seen the flow of power, brighter and hotter than any fire, leaving the body; death's kiss stealing into the flesh, wrinkled and sickly, glazed over eyes without any will. He'd witnessed his father's transformation as he ate the soul. The way his skin tightened around his eyes, and muscles strained against their cloth prison.

Dareund didn't want to see Wello's life drained away. He didn't want her to be a living carcass, dull-dead eyes and slack-jawed, creeping about his father's will. Some of the servants and lower courtiers thought *The Willing* were victims of a disease that prematurely aged them. But Dareund knew their enemies called these creatures by another name—*klegen*.

As if summoned by Dareund's dread, Oran was suddenly astride him, grin intact. "What are you thinking brother? Will you miss the sweet spot between those dark legs?"

"I won't have time to miss her." Dareund knew he would be lying if he denied the claim outright, so he evaded as best he could. "I'll be leaving on my first campaign soon."

Dareund didn't want to admit he had enjoyed it—even knowing she was unwilling. Never before did he feel more like his father's son and that sickened him. But he'd chosen, despite his attraction, not to touch her again. Didn't that make him better? He knew it didn't, and any other justification was just that.

"Maybe you can still mount her when he's finished draining the life from her?" Oran thrust his hips between his two fists, moaning as he did so. When Dareund didn't react, Oran slipped behind him.

Dareund glanced behind. Oran was pulling on Wello's kinked hair and releasing it, one tress at a time. Her eyes narrowed, but she didn't resist. Her intensity focused on Dareund, as if he were responsible for this annoyance. But Dareund knew Oran could do worse, and so he said, "let her be. Isn't it enough she will be all but dead in moments?"

Oran's grin peeled away from his teeth, and Dareund looked away, disgusted. He couldn't believe he was blood-tied to this monster. He grit his teeth, trying not to see the way Oran's finger's dug into the side of Wello's arm. But Dareund knew after a lifetime of bullying that Oran could see through the façade.

"I said stop." Dareund raised his voice, and pulled Wello away from his brother. He hadn't realized that Giaben and Rans were paying close attention to the conversation and intervened as if they read his mind. Rans took Wello by the shoulders and inserted himself between her and the conflict. Giaben stepped up to Dareund's shoulder, his hand on his sword's pommel.

Oran glanced at the soldier as one did a bothersome child. He leaned forward for a parting repartee. "I'm going to be there when you fail. Count on it."

He lumbered off, but the words stayed with Dareund. They seemed to carry weight, as if now that they had been spoken, he *would* inevitably fail. Although this was true of every First Son, Dareund had felt it so keenly, he thought perhaps it was particularly true of him.

As they approached his father's chamber doors, Dareund couldn't shake the feeling he'd already failed. Failed to save one woman. What good could he hope to do, if even this was beyond his power.

They stopped just outside the chamber. Giaben motioned for Hilden and Wollmard to remain in the corridor while the rest of them entered. The heavy chamber doors groaned loudly as they scraped open across the stone floor. The fire burned blue inside his father's chamber—some trick intended to intimidate, or remind visitors of the potency of his magic. As if Dareund needed any reminder.

His father stood illuminated by the glow of his scrying glass. What scenes he watched there were a mystery to Dareund, who had never actually seen anything in the inky orb. The orb itself was contradictory to Dareund. It seemed to emit a harsh greenish glow, but the orb's surface remained dark and shadowed. Dareund wondered if the ephemera only evoked his mistrust because the practice of magic had been so long forgotten and shrouded in mystery. He thought perhaps the orb had once been commonplace, and understood. Perhaps the priestesses of old taught people how to use them, and how to interpret their marbled contours. Dareund wished he had been alive then.

But the green glow from the unreadable sphere crept across his father's face and hands, one of which rested on the pinnacle, making him look even more deathly.

"My First Son," His father said. His voice barely reached a whisper, but in the thick silence in the room, it commanded attention. "My most loyal, glorified progeny . . . Come."

Dareund wanted nothing more than to slink back behind his guards. He was envious of the stillness with which they stood when his only conscious desire was to run, shrink, hide away. But he steeled himself, and stepped forward. Hesitation would only call his father's scrutiny more completely—to his detriment.

His father's hand fell heavy on his shoulders, and Dareund felt a sudden weariness in his entire being. He gazed into the black sphere, clenching his fists to resist the cold despairing that its closed vision instilled in him.

"I trust you have enjoyed your reprieve?" His father's finger trailed through the air as if caressing Wello's form from across the room.

"You are most gracious, my Lord," Dareund said, bowing his head in a way he hoped implied reverence. Really, his mind scrambled for a way to stop the inevitable. An iron poker rested against the wall, waiting to stoke the coals in the fireducts. A coat of arms bearing his father's crest stood at attention beside the desk. It's ceremonial sword's pommel gleamed emerald. Dareund rested his hands on the bowed edge of the table holding the unnaturally weighty scrying glass. He said weakly, "I am ready to carry out your every command."

"Good." The casual tone belied any real concern that Dareund would have answered any other way. "What name have you given the wretch?"

"I have called her Wello."

His father's black eyes pierced him. "That is not a common name among we Sciannese."

Dareund swallowed a surge of panic that clogged up his throat and said, "Neither is Dareund. An uncommon name for a girl with uncommon beauty."

The probing expression in his father's eyes did not change, though his tone did. "A fair choice, son. Bring her to me."

Dareund turned back to face Wello. If she had been unvexed in the corridor, she was no longer. Her eyes were sharp, and her mouth tight—the way her face was often

arranged just before lashing out at him. Her ordinarily smooth chocolaty skin was wrinkled with concern between her brows, and her fingers were tangled in the folds of her skirt. He was surprised to see that Giaben stood close behind her, his hand on her upper arm.

Dareund extended a trembling hand. Wello squeezed Giaben's hand, and then took a hold of Dareund's. Her grip was strong and rigid; his knuckles rubbed together under her embrace. He escorted her to his father's side. A sickening lurch rocked his stomach as his father's gaze lingered over her body. Although Dareund tried to push them away, the memories of her warm, oiled curves surfaced. The memories might have been pleasant except that he recalled, too, the way her face pinched: teeth holding back a scream, eyes squeezing shut, nose wrinkled into her brows.

His father reached out and grabbed her chin, pulling her in close. She squirmed, a stream of incomprehensible Eantoli spilling out of her mouth. His father raised his fist and struck her across the face. She scratched at his hand under her chin even as he lifted her off of her feet. Her foot caught his leg, and he howled. "You will *obey!*"

Dareund searched the room frantically. Two of his father's personal guards stood a few feet away, unfazed by the violence. No doubt more were within shouting distance. Dareund glanced at Giaben and Rans. Maybe Giaben would intervene if Dareund moved to protect Wello. The soldier seemed fond of her, and often volunteered to assist with tasks that would place him in her proximity. Rans, however, would undoubtedly not. He was all duty and frowns—Dareund was pretty sure he was still upset he hadn't been allowed to kill the girl when she attacked the prince.

Dareund didn't like the arithmetic—him, and possibly Giaben versus an immortal tyrant, and as many as a dozen soldiers. Wello was scrappy, she'd left bruises when she

beat on him after he bed her, but he doubted she would be much help against trained soldiers. Dareund still planned the possible escape when a burst of white light erupted from her hands, sending his father stumbling back, his eyes wide with surprise.

She drew herself up tall, and although her lips trembled, a terrible gust of wind ravaged the room. Her eyes absorbed the light until they too were white beacons. But he almost couldn't believe it. She raised her hands, drawing them together as if to shape the wind into an invisible ball between them, but his father recovered quickly, thrusting his claw-like nails into her chest.

She gasped, and the white light surged around her. Her light collided with the place his father touched her, and Dareund watched in awe as wrinkles appeared around the corner's of his father's eyes and mouth. His skin looked wan—as if the light was leeching away the centuries of life.

But just when Dareund imagined his father would shrivel up and die, he spoke a phrase in Eantoli, and the light emanating from Wello dimmed, and flickered out. She locked eyes with Dareund, and he felt he understood despite the language barrier between them. She called on him to repay the debt he owed her.

Hot, urgent hope inflated his lungs, and he found the place of courage within him. Forgetting about the odds and the consequences, Dareund grabbed the poker from its perch and thrust it into his father's side. The force of the thrust jarred Dareund clear to his shoulders. Thick, black blood gurgled over the edge of the makeshift weapon and wet his hands.

An unseen force ripped from his father's body to the edges of the room, like dammed water suddenly freed. Dareund staggered backwards, bumping into Giaben who had drawn his sword and stepped between him and his father's guards.

Wello rose from the ground, stark, bathed in his father's black blood. Several tresses of her dark hair now glowed white, and strange, silver lines danced up her arms and across the hollow of her throat. She no longer looked tremble-some or young. She stood fearsome—a promise—should they survive—of immeasurable change to come.

Chapter 26

The band traveled silently after finding Peglerri's severed arm. No one strayed far enough from the group to be out of sight. Elbeda laid awake when she ought to have been sleeping, her ears straining for the ambient sounds of the mountains. She hadn't heard anything more, but she felt increasingly as if they were being watched. And when they traveled, every snapped twig and rustled branch brought them to a halt.

When they emerged in on the other side of The Spine, Elbeda felt as if the air had been knocked out of her. The seasonal floodwaters had receded, but the ground was still soft and marshy. Elbeda whet her lips and made the whistle call to alert the villagers to their presence, and their friendly intentions.

The fear and uneasiness of Peglerri's death was subsumed by the anxiety of being so close to her childhood home—a place she had vowed never to return to upon fleeing. Elbeda rested a protective hand across her newly protruding bump. No one returned her call. She peered into the darkness, no movement of attacking villagers, no sound or warning filtered through. Only stillness.

Elbeda glanced at Ulndur and shrugged. She knew the men were waiting on her to give them permission to break from their positions. She took a step from the tree line into the clearing. Even eight years later, the choking, cloying fear gripped her. Did her father still live? The places his hands had touched her burned with fresh pain. She reminded herself that she wasn't a child any longer. She carried a knife and knew the difference between a loving touch, and one meant to control or harm.

The men followed her as she crept across the valley. Starlight caught on an object half buried in the mud and Elbeda bent and pulled it from the ground. A bowl washed

away from someone's home. She ran her hand along the chipped rim and set it back down. Would her mother be happy to see her? Would Rorikund? She doubted her welcome would hold any warmth if it was offered at all.

The first three homes she remembered had been destroyed by the flood. Piles of half-dissolved firebrick and washed up wattle and daub were strewn through the trees. Elbeda had walked halfway to the village meeting circle when she smelled death, pungent in the air. Ulndur waved her over to a small corpse. An old woman, her face half picked away by crows, and bones dragged apart, laid rotting at the foot of a half-destroyed home. A fire still burned in a stone pit in the main room of her home. Two of the four walls had crumbled, but the back wall shared with a bedroom stood like a monument.

A man's corpse was found a little ways away. He was missing his eyes, and the flesh on his throat was peeled away, exposing pearly knobs of bone. Elbeda held her cloak under her nose, but the smell seeped through.

She turned and ran through the thicket of trees, past the gathering circle. Past the fallen tree and over the stream to where her family home once stood. The ground was flat now, except three small piles of stones which sat next to where the dirt-floored room she and Rorik shared had once stood.

“Rorikund!”

The forest gave no response. She called his name again, falling against a tree for support. She didn't see any bodies. Maybe that was a good thing. Maybe he lived still. She never should have left him here alone.

Drehn emerged and pulled her into a hug. He shushed her while she wept. She whispered, wet, slobbered words into his chest. “I can't find my brother.”

“Barfromme and Ulundur are gathering the corpses for a pyre. Come.”

“I don’t understand,” Elbeda said. “Every year some of the unlucky drown, but never this many. These people look as if they were attacked—”

“Yes.” He interrupted her before she could even venture a guess.

Normally *Ir Drogkarnor*’s men burned villages down and carried away the women and children for slaves and whores. They didn’t leave the corpses behind to feed carrion and dirt. Elbeda let Drehn lead her back through the village. The other two men had collected five bodies in the gathering circle. They were laid head to foot, arms straight by their sides, eyes closed, as if they merely slept. She only recognized one of the corpses as a neighbor woman. She’d been so young when she left, and her father never let them socialize. She couldn’t even remember the old woman’s name.

Elbeda sat on a tree stump as the men carried the dead past her. Each time, they stopped and she looked with new despair at the body. Nearly twenty bodies in, they brought Lyra and laid the girl at her feet. Tears wracked Elbeda’s chest and she held her hand over her mouth. Elbeda stroked her sister’s braided hair, and wiped her face clean of the dirt streaks. Pulled her cloak off and laid it across her sister like a blanket to hide the gaping wound in her gut.

“This one is yours?”

“My sister. Lyra. She was just a child last I saw her.” Elbeda remembered how much she had hated Lyra, Hylli, and Greanna because they were favored. All of them were fair, and closely resembled their father. He had allowed them to live in the house, and eat to their fill. They had dresses and dolls made that resembled them. Not her. Not Rorik. They were darker complected, like her mother’s people. They stayed in that tiny

dirt room adjoined to the house by only a wall. She and Rorik had dug away at the wall until a small hole offered them a window into the rest of the family.

But she didn't hate the girl anymore. She understood now that her father had probably done the same things to them that he'd done to her—maybe worse.

"I'm so sorry. We found a man near her. How old is your brother?"

"He's thirteen." Her voice broke. She looked up at the star and tried to find a story she could tell herself for comfort. What would she have said to make Rorik feel safe if he was here? She hadn't called on the legends in years, and she couldn't remember which had been his favorite. They'd never meant as much to her as they had to him.

"Then it's not him."

Elbeda closed her eyes when they stopped near her, carrying her father's corpse. She knew it was wrong, and small of her, but she felt relieved he was dead. She turned her head away, and waved them past. He couldn't hurt her anymore. He couldn't hurt anyone. And yet, his death likely orphaned her. Elbeda knew her tears were for herself.

#

No survivors were found within the village. And when all the corpses were huddled together, her brother was not among them. Perhaps he had died early of disease or starvation. Perhaps he had run away too, and later they would meet in some far-off town or city. Elbeda swallowed her acrid hope.

Barfromme used his flint to light the pile of bodies on fire. She laid against Drehn as she watched the bodies burn. The smell was ungodly, but the tendrils of thick grey smoke carried their souls away from *il'umbir*—back to the Allmother. Elbeda prayed to *Allaenne*. If the goddess could create life from dust and breath and song, then maybe she

could find a way to create something new from the souls the smoke returned to her. Rorik would have liked that idea, but he would want to know what the goddess transformed them into. Elbeda searched through the stories. The Goddess was always creating: she turned *Merannee* into the *Mena*, and *Sudal* into the *Suta*; when *Galbennor* called out for aid, *Allaenne* returned *Merannee* to her corporeal form; when *Oldred* needed a weapon that could beat back the *Klegen*, *Allaenne* provided a sword forged in blood, imbued with the souls of his ancestors. Was it any impossible thing to imagine the Mother Goddess could take smoke souls and give them new beauty? Maybe they would return as the glowing *Menalora* blossoms in the spring, or as one of the rare animals who bonded with heroes on their journey.

Elbeda smiled. Although her grief stung like an open wound, she couldn't remember the last time she's felt joy when thinking about her childhood. In the moment, as the smoke siphoned into the heavens, she thought about the brother she'd abandoned and didn't feel guilty. She felt at peace.

“What will you do now?” Drehn asked.

His face was all reflected firelight. The flecks of ash peppered his beard and his pupils glowed as if her were a creature made entirely of flame. Elbeda patted the ashes out of his beard before she said, “I will continue to the Eantoli Collective, and present my child to the *Adumadorn*, as my mother did, and her mother before her.”

“Isn't it tradition that the father accompany you?”

Elbeda laughed. “While the fathers are welcome, their presence is not required. You must have spent awhile in Scianne or her protectorates. They love to make everything about the men there.”

“Well, men do help with the whole, creation of a child,” Drehn said.

Elbeda couldn't tell if the heat in his cheek was from the fire, or embarrassment about the topic of conversation. “Naturally. But the mother is the host, and it is her flesh that creates the new flesh. She is the stronger of the two, and that is why the Mother Goddess chose them as her vessels.”

Drehn held her hand against his cheek for a moment, then brushed his lips against her fingers. Elbeda recalled the first time Beaumond had kissed her. She'd been fifteen, and the kiss felt gross. She'd wiped her mouth when he wasn't looking. But she didn't feel that way now. She closed her eyes and pressed her lips against Drehn's.

When they peeled apart, Drehn said, “I would be honored to accompany you on your journey. Let me present the child with you. It's not safe for you to be on the road alone, and we are already determined to find the Eantoli Collective.”

“Stop talking,” Elbeda said. He smelled of smoke and dirt and sweat. His warm body called to hers—not love, or safety . . . but he was comfortable, like a well-worn dress or sturdy pair of shoes. She kissed him again.

He held her hair and the small of her back as he lowered her into the dirt. Elbeda searched for Barfromme or UIndur, but they had moved away from the pyre, leaving her alone to explore Drehn. Her fingers traced the scars on his arms, and her legs wrapped around his waist. With one hand he guided himself into her, and with the other, he kept her head from hitting the dirt. Together, they struggled in the firelight, until their breath turned to moans, and the pain slipped away.

Chapter 27

Geon groaned under her feet, and the people in the room were remote. Her body ached—starlight filled her veins, pulsed against the prison of her skin. The light whispered to her in a strange, comforting language she could not name, but that she understood the way a child understands how to suckle. As she straightened, lifting herself off the ground, she felt an invisible force connected to her navel, and it tugged at her, beckoning her to the sky.

She was two consciousness at once—both human and not. And while her muscles moved her across the room, the not-human essence in her longed for the buoyancy of flight, longed to be held trapped in gravity in the firmament. She felt as if she had once rested there, and must urgently return.

Words collected themselves on the tip of her tongue. *Aellov. Eslora*. They burned in her throat, contained only by her closed lips. Her fingers itched to trace symbols through the air, though she knew none. Pages of the tome she'd left in Demaré flashed across her mind. Instructions though she could not read them. She felt the air gathering around her, waiting to do her bidding. She need only speak.

She was aware, too, that the princeling approached from her left. The air in his lungs was ready for her command, and if she wished it, she might rob him of it without effort. Power seeped through her, a lusty intoxicating wine.

Another motion interrupted the air, demanding her attention. One of the guards—she knew not which—lifted his sword in attack. She raised her finger. No sooner had it met the steel than the weapon shattered, and she collected the dust in the air, drawing it to her skin with a thought. Steel gloves robed her hands as she took the man by the throat.

She could see into him—into the throbbing, bloody mush of his insides, and see them working.

An arrow glided past her on a lazy stream of air. It struck the man in the eye. He twitched, and the heart which held his blood spasmed quickly for a brief moment, before it stopped entirely. So fragile on the inside, people were. She'd never realized until she was possessed with light. So impermanent.

Her gaze penetrated the whole of the castle. The lives which roused in their sleep. The men clattering from the bowels of the earth to aid their liege. None of it mattered. None of it important.

In one motion, her fingers uncurled from the guard's throat and he slumped to her feet. Feet which still touched the ground, although she no longer felt distinct from it. She was *geon*, and it, she. The world expanded and contracted with her breath. And all the elements trembled at her every thought.

#

Rans reacted on adrenaline and instinct. His arrow practically nocked itself, and the bowstring slid through his finger. The arrow struck true—felling the soldier to Giaben's left, the one which Wello held by the throat. The girl looked at him as if looking through, totally unrecognizing or feeling. She released her grip, and the man doubled over, then crumpled to the ground. Giaben had slit the other man's throat, but not before the man cried out. More men would be flooding the chambers in no time.

Rans cursed. He'd drawn another from his quiver in the beat of a second and met his friend's gaze. He let the arrow fly. Giaben stepped into the arrow's path and knocked it off course with the broad side of his sword before it pierced the First Son.

“Don’t do this,” Giaben pleaded. The tip of his sword was unsteady, like a metronome keeping poor time. “It’s already too late.”

Rans wanted to scream, but years of discipline kept him silent. He was keenly aware of just how late it was for him. His mind pulled him back into the forest, back nearly a decade before, when he’d found Giaben hanging himself. He’d done his duty then. After he’d cut Giaben down, Rans had gone to Commander Jos to report the incident. He’d done so knowing it would mean ritual death for his friend. Ironic, that he had saved his friend’s life only to end it in another way.

At nineteen, he’d been so unsure of himself outside of the commander’s tent. He’d paced from a nearby tree to the closest campfire several times before Commander Jos stuck his head of the tent and bid him come. “Something troubles you, my son?”

Commander Jos, who at the time had been nearly twice Rans’s age, called most soldier by their rank and name with two exceptions; he referred to both Giaben and Rans as his sons when in private conversation. The word unsettled Rans because he knew the commander loved Giaben more dearly than any other, himself included.

Only after entering the tent, and lingering a long moment in the silence had Rans said, “I am conflicted, commander. I know what I must do, and yet I do not wish it done.”

“Speak.” Commander Jos sunk into his cushioned chair and swept his hand in invitation towards a second, less ornate chair. But Rans had been too nervous to sit.

“It is Giaben. I have just found him in dereliction of his duty. He had hung himself from a tree, seeking to end his own life—a life which belongs not to him, but to our Lord Dictate.”

“I see.”

Rans could still perfectly recall the sidelong look the commander gave him, and the sharp tone of his voice when he'd said, "You disappoint me, Rans. Out of all my men, I thought you best able to understand and protect Giaben."

Goddamn him if that didn't sting. Protect Giaben—as if they were still children playing at fighting with wooden swords instead of being fully trained instruments of death about to embark on their first campaign in Eantol territory.

"What if he is unsuited for battle?" Rans had pressed.

"Then he'll be killed." Although the commander's voice carried no inflection, Rans knew he was even more displeased. "Is that what you would have me do?"

The question felt unfair when it rested on his young shoulders. He had always had duty and obligation to guide him, and morality did not encroach upon them. But he was being asked to judge a moral action, to accept the responsibility for Giaben's life or death.

He'd chosen to remain silent, and carry Giaben's secret. To let him live. Giaben went on to save his life more than once in the ensuing campaign. The momentary passion that had moved him to tie the rope around his neck seemed to have passed over his friend, and no other manifestation of unsuitability had been absent until now.

As he stood, staring down the shaft of his arrow at Giaben, Rans could see some of the same unspoken emotion in his friend's eyes that he'd seen that day in the forest. Rans hated feeling conflicted; his right hand shook on the bowstring, itching to feel the thrum of the tension suddenly released.

"You know I have to," Rans said.

Giaben kept the tip of his blade up between them, but with one hand, he herded the First Son and the girl behind him. He said, “Over the balcony. Use the drapes.”

A bead of sweat rolled into Rans’s eye; he blinked it away, raising his bow and tightening his form. Giaben adjusted his defensive stance. “You could come with us. Make a difference.”

“What difference? A difference in what?” Rans lowered his bow. Anger clenched his whole being. “We are sworn to protect the Lord Dictate. *I* am sworn. How can you so lightly throw away your entire life’s purpose? How could you think I would?”

Behind Giaben, the young prince and the girl were already stringing the drapes from the balcony. In the corridor, Rans could hear the clatter of hastily-armored soldiers congregating outside the door. He raised his arrow once more.

Giaben’s face twisted into a familiar, melancholic expression. He slid his sword into its sheath and said, “It isn’t my life’s entire purpose, and it shouldn’t be yours. Do what you must.”

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The celestial power which gripped her echoed through the soldier and the prince to a lesser, varying degree. *Miju* clustered around the soldier, and his breath was like a song which kept it there. The prince seemed unable to hold his, though it swam around him like a stream forking just before it hit his corporeal form.

They were all going the wrong direction—down to the ground rather than the sky. She tried to climb the delicately interlaced bedding, but the soldier pulled at her leg in regular intervals. She knew him intimately, but could not call his name to her mind.

When his fingers closed around her ankle, she felt the tether between her and the heavens slacken. Anxiously, she reached for it with a quickly muttered, “*Allaenne jáduan.*”

“*Raspaece,*” the soldier said, wrongly though she knew now why. Time, like *geon* itself, responded to her whim. She saw the seaside lean-to, the straw-haired woman with her child, singing a lullaby in the storm. She saw the death of the woman, the torture of the boy, the undoing of his blood-rite. And the language—a broken, isolated dialect closer to the old tongue than her own—came to him more from magic than memory, though the two blended when he spoke.

The word was enough. Her yearning for the sky eased, and she recalled that she was a mortal being, too. The danger still felt more distant than real. But she pushed her thoughts from the sky to the ground, and hurried her descent.

By the time they reached the ground, she could just remember her own name: Wello.

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Rans’s breath caught as Giaben turned and followed the other two onto the balcony. No matter how badly he tried to let go of the bowstring, he could not. He could not bear to see his friend riddled with arrows, laying in the seeping blood that covered the ground. In anger, he released two arrows, loose and un-aimed, in the direction of the balustrade before casting his bow aside.

A rustling sound drew Rans’s attention to the Lord Dictate’s corpse. He felt a chill run down his neck and shake out the end of his limbs. The black blood that stained the ground was slowly rolling back across the stone floor, eking into the open wounds on his body.

Words like *god-king* and *immortal* seemed powerful and lyrical compared to the actuality of what Rans watched. Perhaps it was the vestiges of the conflict with Giaben which contributed to the unease in him—at least that is what he told himself rather than admit the sense of wrongness originated with his liege-lord.

Rans raced to the balcony, side-stepping the gradually reanimating corpse. The rail hit him in the gut as he leaned over the edge. The rent drapes tossed in the wind. Giaben was nowhere in sight.

Rans knew he'd forfeited his life when he'd lowered his weapon and allowed Giaben to escape, but panic sharpened him, and he couldn't merely wait for his demise. Rans knew he had to act, but for the first time in his life, he didn't know what to do.

"Help, traitor!" He yelled. He threw the chamber doors open and called shouted again. "Help! Our Lord Dictate is wounded!"

The Lord Dictate's body arched, accompanied by an animalistic groan Rans couldn't be sure was uttered or simply the sound of a wound stitching itself up with magic. As soldiers poured into the hallway, mingled with advisers, courtiers, other sons, and his favored mistress, the First Son's mother, Rans motioned them through. For a moment, he met the First Mother's eyes, and felt some understanding pass between them. She stopped in her tracks, her hands twisting a layer of her skirts, pressed to her chest. She turned before he spoke and retraced her steps down the corridor passage.

"They went over the balustrade—the *hipschet* First Son, his whore, and the traitor, Giaben."

The words tasted foul and lingered in his mouth long after he wished he hadn't spoken them. The men rushed to the balcony. Commanders and Lieutenants shouted

orders over each other in a cacophony of panic. The crush of bodies swarmed Rans on every side, calling out indistinguishable questions to him.

The sudden realization that he would now be responsible for hunting down his friend hit him like a well-placed knee to the gut. Although the questions directed to him lessened in no way, he found he could do or say no more.

END