

## ➤ ATTENTION READER ◀➤

*Please note that this is not a finished book.*

*A bound galley is the first stage of printer's proofs,  
which has not been corrected by the author, publisher, or printer.*

*The design, artwork, page length, and format are  
subject to change, and typographical errors will be corrected  
during the course of production.*

*If you quote from this galley, please indicate  
that your review is based on uncorrected text.*

*Thank you,*

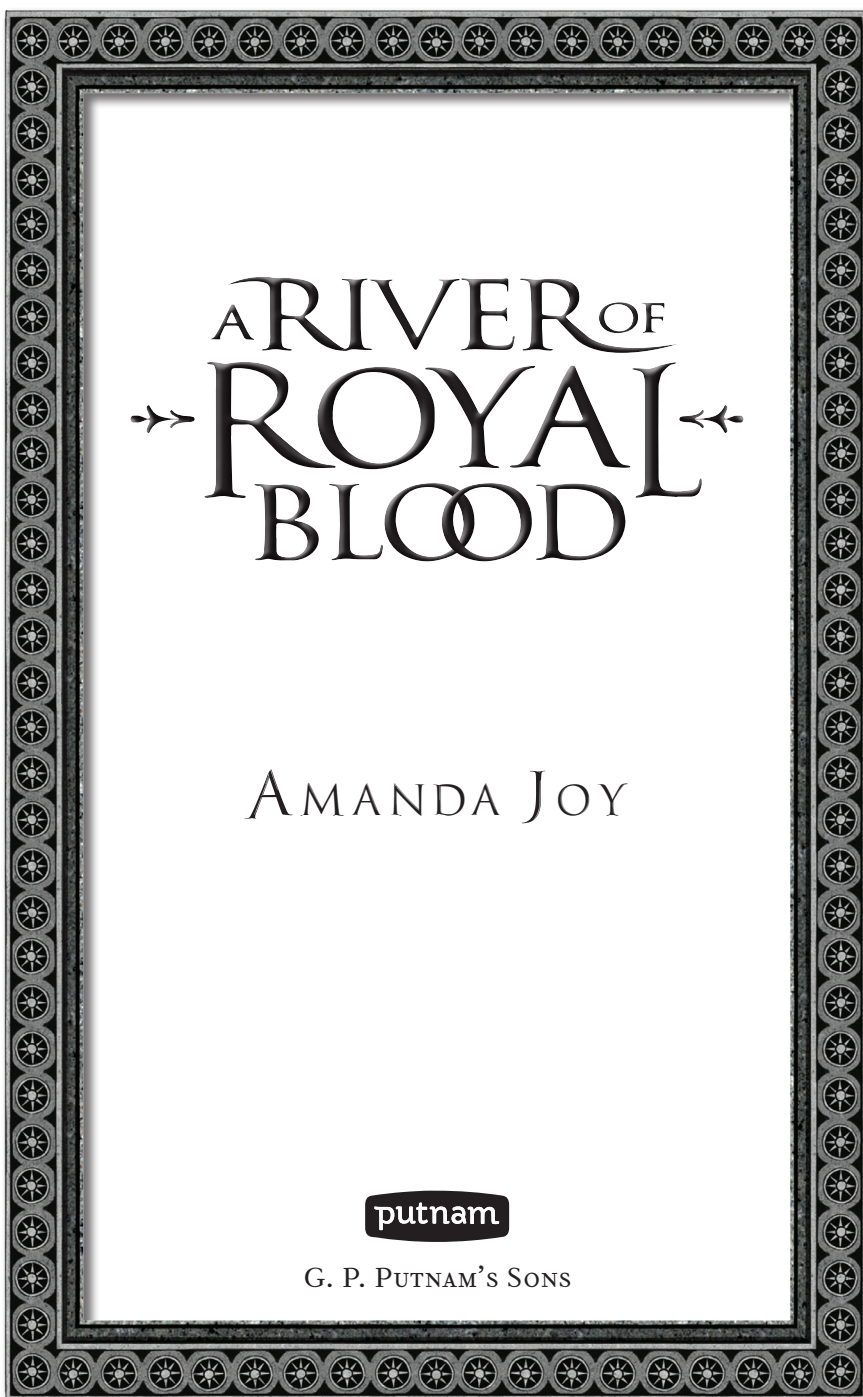
G. P. PUTNAM'S SONS



## UNCORRECTED PROOF

Coming in October 2019  
from G. P. Putnam's Sons  
*an imprint of Penguin Random House LLC*  
PenguinTeen.com  
October • Fiction • 5 ½ x 8 ¼ • 368 pages  
Ages 12 and up • Grades 7 and up





G. P. PUTNAM'S SONS  
an imprint of Penguin Random House LLC, New York



Copyright © 2019 by Amanda Saulsberry.

Penguin supports copyright. Copyright fuels creativity, encourages diverse voices, promotes free speech, and creates a vibrant culture. Thank you for buying an authorized edition of this book and for complying with copyright laws by not reproducing, scanning, or distributing any part of it in any form without permission. You are supporting writers and allowing Penguin to continue to publish books for every reader.

G. P. Putnam's Sons is a registered trademark of Penguin Random House LLC.

Visit us online at [penguinrandomhouse.com](http://penguinrandomhouse.com)

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data is available upon request.

Printed in the United States of America.

ISBN 9780525518587

1 3 5 7 9 10 8 6 4 2

Design by Suki Boynton.

Text set in Fournier MT Pro.

This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents either are the product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously, and any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, businesses, companies, events, or locales is entirely coincidental.

*Dedication*



## ↔ PROLOGUE ↔

*The Naming*

ASIM HAD NEVER known a spell of Harkening to last this long.

It was his tenth morning venturing to the spellwork chamber at dawn to collect a sheet of parchment slipped under the door. So far it had been unmarked, which meant his Sorceryn brethren still had not determined the magick inside the Princess. Every day after learning there was no news, he would climb to the top of the Temple and send up a plume of blue smoke, conveying the message to the city.

Harkenings—the spells cast by Sorceryn to name the magick inside newborn human children—weren't usually cause for such ceremony. But in Myre, nothing was so closely followed as the birth, and subsequent naming, of a Princess.

Asim walked the dim halls of the Temple. Robed Sorceryn nodded grimly as he passed. They knew his task. He won-

dered if inside they were half holding their breath, as he was.

Today he would likely find the parchment slashed with black ink for death. A Harkening spell that lasted longer than five days was dangerous, but once the spell had begun, it could not be broken. After ten days, chances of survival were exceedingly slim.

He rounded the last corner and stopped cold. The doors were thrown open and five Sorceryn stood in the hallway. One held a small, wild-haired thing, howling and swaddled in bright poppy cloth—the Princess.

They murmured the name of her magick in reverent voices, barely noticing his presence. He was, after all, just an apprentice.

Asim spun on his heel and headed to the aviary. He should have gone straight to the Temple's roof and lit the signal fire, but there was another task he must see to first. Head bowed, Asim moved through the halls quickly, lest anyone notice the delay. He crested the Temple's central staircase, but stopped before he reached the top. Instead he took a sharp left and emerged in the musty room where the messenger ravens were housed. Already Asim could hear the bells of the Ivory Tower ringing to announce the end of the spell, meaning the apprentice sent to bring word to the Queen's Palace had already arrived. Asim was already minutes behind.

Myre's capital, Ternain, would soon descend into celebration. It was as everyone had hoped: a girl child, a Rival Heir born to fight for her seat upon the throne. For Queens ruled in Myre and killed for the right to do so. Weeks ago the Auguries had predicted a Blood Moon, an omen of great change, would rise tonight. At sundown people would fill the

streets—fey, bloodkin, and human alike—chanting as the Sorceryn had.

Asim hastily affixed a message to a raven's leg and reached below his collar, fingering the tattoo inked upon his shoulder. He whispered a location into the bird's ear.

Once he felt the magick take hold, he sent the raven gliding out of a nearby window.



The raven flew north. Day turned to night as it followed the Red River up through the mountains beyond Myre, until finally it came to a valley ringed with sheer cliffs, like a mouth full of broken teeth. The creature alighted on a black tent in the small camp assembled at the foot of the highest peak.

Drawn by the familiar scrape of talons against canvas, a horned woman with silver hair and a smooth, unlined face emerged. Shielding her face against snowfall, she scanned the white-capped peaks that encircled the valley, the snow glistening beneath a bleeding moon, and removed the small, hollow bone strapped to the raven's leg. It was about the size of a finger joint and sealed with blue wax; she tucked the message into the folds of her cotton skirt and returned to her tent.

The woman lit a candle and carried it to her bedroll before easing the strip of parchment from its tight roll. There were just three words: *Marrow and blood*.

She read the message three times, the words sinking into her skin like frost, and then held the paper to the flame. As it crumbled to ash, she began to plan the fall of a Queendom.



— I —

# BLOOD MAGICK

Magick of marrow and blood, a rare gift, held most notably by the first human Queen of Myre and continued through her line. It is also the most fearsome. Despite a Court known to exalt the strength of its monarchs, the gruesome practices of this magick have made it a subject of whispers and, for its users, shame.

This is unsurprising. Power has always inspired fear.

—From *Killeen: The Cobalt  
Dagger of Myre*, by Kreshi Isomar



## ↔ CHAPTER 1 ↔

THE PASSAGE BENEATH my bedchamber was silent as a crypt, though as always, the Empress scorpions that nested in these forgotten tunnels started hissing disapproval the moment my feet touched the ground.

I crouched and checked the circle of cinnamon sticks and dried lavender I'd laid to deter the wicked beasts, and then knotted the hem of my skirt. If left hanging, the chime and rattle of its beading would echo through the passages, and although I'd never crossed paths with anyone here, I couldn't risk discovery.

I adjusted the belt knife in its soft leather holster at the small of my back. Whenever I shifted, nicks in the wooden handle scratched my skin, but it couldn't be helped. This knife was my only weapon plain enough to suit my disguise. In a floor-sweeping skirt and a top that bared my midriff but covered my arms and their tattoos, I could pass as a common human girl out for a night of revelry.

Flint struck stone inches from my face, sparks dancing through inky darkness. I jumped, a curse on my lips, but my hand fell from my knife. “I’d appreciate some warning next time.”

“Just keeping you sharp,” said the young man standing mere feet away.

Falun, second-in-command of my guard and my closest friend, towered over me in the cramped passage. He was long-limbed and graceful, though still not quite grown into his wide shoulders. Like many of the fey, who originally came from the North, Falun was fair skinned and fine haired. Even in the scant torchlight, his skin gleamed like mother-of-pearl. All the fey had a certain sameness—luminous skin, oversize eyes, pointed ears, and vibrant coloring—but Falun was among the most beautiful. His hair was streaked with apple red and dark gold, and the sharp line of his jaw emphasized his full-lipped smile.

Two nights ago, Falun had gone to my room at dawn to propose a journey to the kitchens and found me missing, my bed pushed aside, trapdoor hanging open. He knew I became restless at night, and instead of sounding the alarm, he’d waited until I returned. In exchange for such a kindness, I’d decided to bring him tonight, though I’d been very light on the details.

Falun held the torch to the passage wall, the dancing flames making his blue eyes flash silver as he inspected the words engraved on the stone. They were written in the khimaer language, the sinous alphabet of the people who’d once ruled from this Palace. Nearly two hundred years ago, humans had wrested control of the Queendom from the

khimaer, but signs of the previous rulers still lingered all over Myre.

Falun's eyebrows rose as he recognized the language. "How did you find this place?"

"When I was seven, Isadore and I found a trapdoor after her earring rolled under my bed." I didn't add that we'd found a similar hatch beneath hers and spent a year sleeping very little as we explored every inch of these passages at night.

I went to great lengths to avoid discussing my sister.

The tips of Falun's tapered ears went pink. "Isadore knows about this place? Don't you worry about seeing her?"

I snorted. "Why would my sister come here? There is nothing about the Palace that would make her want to leave."

"True enough." He swiped a hand across his face, but his grimace remained in place. "I'll regret this, won't I?"

"You won't, and you know it, why else would you have come?"

He leaned forward as if sharing a secret. "Actually I came to keep you out of trouble."

"And that works just as well." I grinned, even though I could protect myself. I snatched his torch and snuffed out the flames beneath my boot. "Follow me."

We ran through darkness so thick the only sign of Falun beside me was his hand in mine. After months of sneaking out through these passages, finding my escape route—and avoiding the scorpion nests—had become second nature. When Isadore and I were children, we'd stuck to the passages around our quarters, but when I returned to the capital ten months ago and began exploring again, I soon realized they

tunneled through the grounds around the Queen's Palace, right up to its outer wall. The floors of the passages changed now from stone to tile to packed earth, a sure sign that we were close. After about a mile, we stopped at a steel ladder. Night air blew through an opening overhead.

I climbed to the top and emerged in a garden with rows of flowering trees, though they didn't bloom during the scorching weeks of high summer, as it was now. Fresh air kissed my skin, heavy with damp heat. I breathed it in, my pulse a driving beat beneath my skin.

*Almost*, it hummed.

Falun joined me, following my gaze to a carved expanse of white stone.

The wall that marked my freedom.

I wasn't allowed outside it without a guard of at least twenty, per my mother's stipulations. Compared to my home for the previous three years—at Fort Asrodei, an army base in the highlands, where my father still lived—the Palace was cramped and held little of interest. Every room crawled with courtiers, the very last people I wanted encounter. Aside from training at the sparring grounds and attending Court every morning, I rarely left my rooms. These nightly excursions were my only escape.

We scaled the wall and dropped down into a vacant alley in the bloodkin sector.

Four races dwelled in Myre—human, fey, bloodkin, and khimaer. Of the four, only bloodkin, fey, and humans were allowed to live freely in the capital, and the city was divided evenly among them. Humans lived in the southern sector, fey

in the east, and bloodkin in the north. The Red River was west of the city, where its red-brown waters were clogged with river ships and water markets.

Falun and I left the alley and emerged in a narrow avenue lined with abandoned flats and blood brothels. The men and women strolling beside us could've passed for human—the darkness hid the telling red tinge to their skin—but for the bloodletting knives at their belts, the scabbards marked with patterns to signify the wearer's trade. When bloodkin reached maturity at seventeen, they sustained themselves by drinking the blood of the living. The narrow blades weren't worn out of necessity—bloodkin largely used their fangs to feed—but were mandated by a law created so that humans who feared bloodkin could identify them at a distance.

The northern sector was a warren of streets so cramped you could barely tell them from the alleys. Most shops were shuttered and didn't look like they'd be reopening anytime soon. The Night Souk was buried within those tight streets. Because it was a smuggler's market, the peddlers set up their makeshift stalls at sunset and took them down by sunrise. When we arrived business was still thriving, before fear of a visit from the City Guard sent many of the smugglers home early.

"Ya, ya," they cried. "Ho-chee-chee, ho-chee-chee! Best in Ternain!"

We passed towers of stoneware stacked haphazardly, vats filled with powder dyes, and burlap sacks of beans and spice pods. I stopped to exchange two coppers for a handful of spell-worked beads that wound through my curls with little

effort and would fall out whenever I bade them. Clothiers hawked silks, stretching out their arms to measure the yardage and show off the vivid colors.

Gazes lingered on Falun as much as could be expected—he was, after all, lovely—and their eyes moved right over me, a plain human girl to all appearances. Exactly as I intended.

My minimal disguise worked for two reasons. No one expected a princess in these streets, and so no one truly saw me. Knowing the young princess was orange-eyed and wild-haired was different from connecting those features to a random girl in the market. My first nights outside the Queen's Palace, I thought if I let my cloak slip even once, someone would recognize me. But in the bloodkin sector, most had never seen any of the royal family up close. And even if they had, I'd been away for three years and since my return, I rarely left the Palace. Few outside of it knew my face.

Still I was careful. I dropped my eyes to the ground whenever anyone met them, and kept my hands hidden unless haggling with a shop owner absolutely required it. If I had more ordinary magick, I wouldn't have bothered to hide my tattoos. Every human in Myre had magick inked onto their skin, but the white and red symbols—for marrow and blood—on my arms drew the eye.

Ahead of us, drums rolled like thunder. We'd finally reached the Patch, where bloodred tiles had been used to mend the broken paving stones of the sector's main thoroughfare. The tiles taken on a different purpose soon after—a place to dance.

Gripping Falun's hand, I took off running toward the

sound, coming to an abrupt stop as we reached the press of bodies around the Patch.

Throngs of young fey glided through the street with flowers woven through lustrous hair and brass bells hanging from their wrists. *Glamour*, the fey ability to cast illusions over the world and themselves, made their glossy skin shine as bright as the moon. Beside them human girls in large groups held hands, swirls of silver paint on their tattooed arms glittering as they passed around tiny cups of ouitza, dark liquor made from the sugarcane that grew along the river.

Three-story *akelaes*—Myrean homes built around a central courtyard—painted in bright jewel tones filled the street, bougainvillea climbing up terraces filled with candles as tall as my waist. Food carts were set up beneath the eaves, selling liquor and paper sheaths full of roasted nuts and boiled shellfish.

I collided with a bloodkin boy with flawless umber skin. He smiled, hands falling to my hips to steady me. He opened his mouth, but Falun's hand dropped onto my shoulder.

The boy frowned, but when he looked at Falun, his gaze warmed. "Are you new to the Patch?"

Falun's cheeks reddened, mouth hanging open as he sought an answer.

"We aren't new," I said, removing both of their hands.

"See you on the tiles," the boy called as I pushed farther into the crowd. Falun followed, glancing over his shoulder as the boy disappeared behind a group of human girls.

One handed Falun two cups and ran her fingers through his hair. He smiled and the girl's eyes went soft with won-

der. She didn't even blink as he plucked her hand away. The ouitza burned a path down my throat. Falun sipped his, wrinkled his nose, and gave the rest to me.

The gathering opened up and I caught sight of the Copper Steps, the fountain where coins were dropped in nightly; by morning about half had been retrieved by those who desperately needed them. I explained the custom to Falun, and we kissed our coins, wishing blessings for whoever would find them.

After we tossed the coins into the fountain Falun leaned down to my ear, yelling over the sound of the drums. "You told me there would be dancing?"

We inched around the lip of the fountain to the back, where the patch of crimson tiles began. We'd made it just in time for the next dance. The drumming was the call to the dance, a prelude of sorts. Already boys and girls were lined up across the tiles, arms held aloft, sweat coating their faces.

Musicians sat across from them. There were five young men beating on makeshift drums, a willowy man with a fiddle, and the singer, a tall, imposing bloodkin woman with a hawkish nose and beaded braids hanging down her back.

I let go of Falun's hand and stepped onto the tiles. "Watch first, and then join me."

There was only one dance done on these tiles at night: chatara, the dance of new lovers.

It started in your feet and you started the dance alone.

The drummers began with a simple beat, building it gradually. Our hips rocked side to side, keeping pace with the rhythm. We twirled, hips winding in figure eights until the singer began to howl.

Gooseflesh prickled my arms as I swept them down and raised them back up to the night sky. I tossed my head, watching the moon as I moved through the steps—switching my hips and kicking my feet into the air.

The singer's magick swept through the crowd, carried by the sound of her voice. Bloodkin called it the *thrall*, because with it, they could ensnare the mind until they controlled every emotion and sensation a person felt. This was partly the cause for the laws mandating bloodletting knives, so that no one could be enthralled unaware, so that people could guard their minds against attack. Even among bloodkin, the singer's was a rare gift. Most believed bloodkin projected the *thrall* with their eyes, but some could also use their voices.

I felt the magick heightening my emotions as I danced. The singer's *thrall* turned all our emotions into a shared experience. As we danced, we became one in our wanting, and the awareness of our bodies sharpened until it was dizzying. I felt sweat slide down our spines and the scrape and glide of fabrics I wasn't wearing.

The smell of salty blood, orange blossoms, and incense filled the air—the scent of the singer's magick. It pulsed through the air, pushing every movement farther. Curls clung to sweat-dampened cheeks as I arched back, twining my arms above my head. Each movement carried echo and premonition, of the girl just a beat ahead of me, of the boy just behind.

And when the singer's voice broke, the sharp edge was like nails dragged slowly across my skin. We all crowed with her, as partners joined us on the tiles.

I didn't expect Falun yet, so I jumped when warm hands

circled around my waist, soft and dry and hot against my skin.

It was the bloodkin boy from earlier, smiling sweetly, springy coils of hair falling into dark brown eyes. “Your friend won’t join us?” He looked to where Falun stood at the edge of the tiles. His eyes were wide but unreadable.

“Not yet.” Our limbs twined together as we moved in sync. He caught my wrist and spun me around. I fell flush against him, warm from the ouitza and his touch. “Though I think he will join sooner with your convincing.”

“You think so?” His warm breath touched my cheek.

“I know so.” I smiled, beckoning Falun forward.

He didn’t move. But there was naked wonder in his eyes—mine had been just as wide the first time I laid eyes on this place. The bloodkin boy, whose name I still hadn’t gotten and hoped never to, waved him over. Still Falun didn’t move.

I stopped dancing and held out my hand, wishing I had brought him here sooner. After a long moment Falun stepped onto the tile and gave my hand a squeeze.

I left him with the bloodkin boy and found another partner. One who didn’t seem to see me at all, and only wanted to dance.

Even out here, there were things I couldn’t allow myself. Princesses bound for death couldn’t have romantic entanglements. It would be too cruel, for them and for me.

I danced, stopping to drink and eat, and trade partners. An hour passed Falun and I danced together; I coaxed his stiff limbs into rhythm and showed him how the deadly grace inside him was useful for more than swinging a sword. The bloodkin boy stuck fast to Falun and I tried to ignore the twinge of longing in my chest when they kissed.

They disappeared into the throng together and another's arms wound about my waist. I turned to find a young human man, his skin a soft warm brown. He was tall, with muscle-bound arms tattooed in white. Something about him nagged at me. I had to crane my neck to get a good look at his face. His nose was at least twice broken, the end jutting to the left, and his eyes were hazel. A warm, inviting color, and yet when they caught mine, unease swept through me.

I stepped out of his embrace. He was wearing a City Guard's blue uniform and his eyes were warm with lust. He spoke in a ragged voice: "Pretty little thing, aren't you?"

I bared my teeth at him, spitting out a curse as I backed away.

His gaze, once leering, sharpened. "You . . ."

I could have my knife out and pressed against his throat in the time it would take for him to draw his next breath. I would have, if not for the crowd dancing blithely around us.

Keeping the City Guard within my sight, I searched for Falun, but saw no sign of him, no flash of red hair, no fine-boned face. I caught a glimpse the Guard's cruel smile before the singer screamed out one word: "Raid!"

Bodies slammed into me on every side and I could still feel the Guard's eyes burning a hole in my back. My stomach knotted as more City Guardsmen in dark blue uniforms spilled onto the Patch, cudgels and short swords in hand. Cries of fear and the sound of weapons striking flesh filled the air.

I pushed toward the Copper Steps, mouth dry. At least once a week, raids on the smugglers in the Night Souk spilled into the Patch. Public gatherings were against the law in Ter-

nain after midnight. Most of the time, the guardsmen only arrested those who couldn't afford a bribe, and I always kept my sigil ring on me in case I was caught. It wasn't the raid that scared me. It was the guard.

For a moment, it had seemed like he recognized me, but then why hadn't he told the other guards? Either way I had to lose him in the crowd. I would run until I found Falun or reached the Palace wall, whichever came first.

I slammed into a woman's back and she fell to the ground. As I helped her to her feet a hand curled around my elbow.

Heart pounding, I reached for my belt knife and the guardsman nearly wrenched my arm out of its socket.

"Eva, it's *me*," Falun said. "We have to get back to the Palace. *Now*."

His skin had lost its sheen and his usually pointed ears were rounded like a human's. His hair shifted color as I watched, from fiery red to muddy brown. He was using *glamour*, the fey ability to cast illusions over the world and themselves. Our fingers laced together and his magick slipped over my skin like a wash of scalding water. We ran.

## ➤ CHAPTER 2 ◀

THE DOORS OF the Throne Room were tall enough to admit a great many creatures—horned, winged, and the like—though only humans and fey passed through them now. Falun and I stood before them, awaiting our announcement to the Court. Their exquisite metalwork shone in the morning light, but it was the portraits lining the hall that always drew my eye. All eight of the human Queens seemed to glare down at me, eyes cold despite the smiles curving their lips.

As with every time I waited outside Court, the sight of Queen Raina made my jaw clench. The First wore a necklace of bones held together by fine golden chains and the tattoos on her arms mirrored mine almost exactly—chains of white animal bones woven through the petals of crimson desert roses with leaves shaped like blades.

We had shared the same magick—of marrow and bone.

She was known as the First because she was the first human Queen to sit on the Ivory Throne. In the past, the khimaer ruled Myre; their elders chose Queens from the

most powerful daughters born to their noble tribes. Millennia passed under their peaceful rule, until two hundred years ago, when Raina the First led humans in a rebellion against the throne. She slaughtered thousands of khimaer to gain the throne, killing off all but a few of the tribes. When the rest rebelled a decade after the war, she forced every khimaer in the Queendom to move into two remote Enclosures, because she believed they would only rebel again if left free. In the generations since, little had changed. The only sure way for khimaer to escape the Enclosures now was to enlist in the Queen's Army.

During the Great War, she'd killed her sister for remaining loyal to the khimaer. It was after Raina's fratricide that the rival heir system was born.

Most humans believed that Raina was our greatest Queen. Though Myre was the most powerful nation on the continent of Akhimar, there were two other nations on the continent and both were hostile. There was Dracol, the small, magickless human kingdom north of the A'Nir Mountains, and the Rouné Lands, the lawless country more or less governed by bands of thieves with their own monarchs and courts.

Raina had led explorations of both lands, and extended Myre's boundaries by seizing control of the Mysoado Isles, which no other mainland Queen had done before, and she grew the nation's coffers by trading with the lands beyond Akhimar. I didn't see it that way. The ballads written to honor the slaughter she'd led in the Great War made me sick.

Inheriting her magick was a curse. It made me a source of curiosity and dread for most people I met. It struck me as the worst kind of trick, having magick of marrow and bone. The

Court said it wanted the strongest Queen possible, and yet the stories of Raina's magick were too chilling, too damning. She'd gone onto battlefields, not just as ruler, but a weapon.

They could not reconcile their next Queen having such violent power, though in truth they had nothing to fear from me. The Sorceryn had named my magick, and tattooed my skin, but they could not teach me how to wield it. The last time marrow and blood had appeared in the Killeen line was five generations ago. All records of its practices had been lost.

Falun gave my hand a squeeze, following my gaze to the portrait. Distaste flickered across his face.

Several hours had passed since the raid at the Patch, and though we'd snuck back into the Palace with little trouble, he was still ill at ease. I pitched my voice low: "You'd think we were facing a battalion of soldiers."

"I'd prefer that, at least we would have weapons in hand." He looped his arm through mine, not at all looking like he'd gone without sleep. He was resplendent in soldier white and a coppery braid more intricate than any I could manage hung to the middle of his back. "I'll relax once I'm convinced we aren't walking into another disaster."

"No luck there," I muttered, as more trouble surely waited beyond those doors.

When I turned thirteen, I'd journeyed to Asrodei to live with my father and to search the Queendom for someone who could instruct me in marrow and blood magick. During the three years I was away a chasm had opened up between the Court and me. What interested my peers—rumors, wealth, and subtle political maneuvering—I found either exhausting or infuriating. If not for Falun, who'd

spent those three years at Asrodei training to become a soldier in the Queen's Army, these trips to the Throne Room would have been more loathsome than I could stand. As it was, I had to resist the urge to return to my rooms and claim my monthly bleeding had struck.

The crier—a tall, narrow-boned man who bore an uncanny resemblance to a crow despite his white-and-blue livery—eyed us, his lips flattened like a beak. I resisted the urge to tap the diadem perched on my brow to hasten this process.

I smiled a wolf's smile, tongue sliding across my teeth. The corners of the Crow's mouth turned down in exaggerated annoyance. Well, the feeling was mutual and a welcome distraction from the dread beginning to pool in my stomach. I hated being announced. It would've been better to slip into the room unseen like a ghost. Or better yet, not to have come at all.

He motioned for the guards at the door and folded back his shirtsleeves, revealing sinuous black-and-ochre tattoos. The doors swung open with a groan just as the Crow pressed his hands to his neck. Beneath his touch the skin reddened and the smell of burnt sugar and mint filled the doorway.

Though I didn't use my magick, I'd always been able to smell its use in others, each scent as distinct as the crier's magick of speed and sound.

"Her Highness Evalina Grace Killeen," his voice boomed, racing ahead of us into Court. "Attended by Lieutenant Falun Aramis of House Malfar."

Despite my earlier confidence, it was Falun who pulled me forward, slippered feet dragging across the marble tiles.

The Throne Room was a circular courtyard surrounded by a garden of stone pillars, each carved with a different legend from Myre's past, like that of Sikama, the prince who ate the sun, and that of Meya, the ebon horse who rode shadows. Mosaics on the walls depicted Myre's varied regions—glittering gold for the Kremir Sands, slate and white for the A'Nir Mountains, emerald for the jungles and ochre for the grasslands. High summer sunlight filled the courtyard. Already I'd begun to sweat, though I wasn't sure whether to attribute that to my nerves or the heat. Soon it would grow too warm and Mother would have one of the Court magick workers cool the air.

The Ivory Throne was in the center of the room. Rising behind it was another, even larger portrait of Raina, so that the Court could always weigh its current Queen's against her legacy.

The throne looked to be carved from the trunk of a massive tree, with vines curling over the arms and delicate rosettes curled up at the base. Atop it, my mother looked as if she was sitting in a lush, albeit frozen, garden. It suited her, icy and remote in a diaphanous white dress with piles of pale blond curls tumbling over her shoulders. Her hands rested on the arms of the throne, tattoos of crashing waves ending right below her elbows.

Queen Lilith, her magick of air and sea, maintained a cool expression. Back straight, shoulders rolled back, her delicate chin pointed up, she gave no reaction at my arrival.

Well, when I arrived late in a dress that didn't match House Killeen sigil—the cobalt dagger—being ignored was not the worst reaction. Since she'd demanded my return

to Ternain last year, our relationship had not progressed beyond our old dynamic of constant disappointment and long, thorny silences. I'd tried to numb myself to it, but pain still lanced through my chest when she ignored me for all the Court to see and whisper about later.

I clenched my fists at the sight of Lord Cassis at her side, whose traces of fey blood made him tall, lean, and unaccountably beautiful. His skin was dark brown, and his eyes and hair were the same shade of dark violet. On hand rested upon Mother's shoulder as he whispered into her ear, far too familiar. My parents had been estranged since I was nine, but the presence of her lover at Court still came as shock. It wasn't his existence that infuriated me; it was Mother flaunting him like a consort, when Papa was just a week's ride north.

Courtiers lounged about the room on low sapphire sofas; servants hovered near them with pitchers of chilled wine. Taking advantage of the heat, most of the women wore light kaftans or the *kinsah*, gowns with detached bodices and long, silk skirts. The men fared worse, sweating in their *helbis*, knee-length coats embroidered with patterns in the colors of their House. Most turned to watch our entrance, their whispering voices choking the air. The sound of my teeth grinding soon joined the chorus.

"I know you'd rather be anywhere else right now," Falun murmured, "but at least try not to look pained."

I plastered on a fake smile and wiped sweating palms on the crimson silk of my kaftan. "Happy?" He nodded, displaying a far courtlier curve of the lips. "You should go find Jessypha."

“Are you quite sure you’d like to face them alone?” Falun said. “I can avoid my mother for one day.”

I cut a look at him. Since Lady Malfar had been named to the Queen’s Council, she never missed a day in Court and if I had to see my mother, he had to see his.

“Oh all right, if I must. You’ll be fine?”

“I always am,” I murmured softly.

He frowned at the lie, but before he could reply, I squared my shoulders and set off for the throne. We would find each other afterward, once our duties were met. In truth I didn’t want anyone around when I spoke to my mother. The sooner I got this over with, the sooner we could escape this place.

I had taken ten steps at most before I heard her: laughter like a shower of broken glass and the smoky, knowing tone of her voice. My sister.

I walked toward the nearest pillar as I scanned the room. Most of the Court was gathered around the ring of columns closest to the throne, but a large group of young courtiers remained at a distance. They all stood gathered around one young woman, holding her own court.

I cursed such a fool mistake. I should have searched for my sister the moment I stepped into the room, and then kept far away. Isadore was two years older than me, and though we’d once been as close as sisters could be, when I returned to Ternain, she’d made it her business torment me. Few of the younger members of Court were outside Isadore’s influence.

Today would be especially infuriating to Isadore. A week ago an Auguri had come to Court to announce that a Blood Moon would rise tonight. The Auguries, women who read the sky’s omens to map out Myre’s future, rarely left the Temple

they shared with their male counterparts, the Sorceryn. The omens triggered visions, which the Auguries then interpreted for the Queen. The details of the visions were sealed to the crown, and rarely shared with anyone else. The appearance of an Auguri at Court had filled the streets of Ternain with talk of the moon. The last time the city had seen such a marvel was nearly seventeen years ago.

In Auguri teachings, Blood Moons were portents of great change. The First had been named beneath one and so was I. And in my Harkening spell to learn my magick, the Sorceryn had named it marrow and bone, just like the First. Bets were set while I was still in swaddling, predicting I would become the true heir, and eventual Queen. My mother had never given me any hint to what the Auguries saw in my future and almost seventeen years later, I'd fallen short of those early expectations. Isadore was the would-be Queen; I was only Princess Eva, my name said with disappointment.

All because I did not know how to use my magick—a weakness few in the Queendom could forgive. Soon after returning from Asrodei, my mother had asked for a demonstration of the magick I had learned while away. Before the entire Court, I was forced to admit that I couldn't use the one gift given to every person born on Myre's soil. Rumors of my inadequacy had spread through the Ternain quickly.

Still the Auguries' announcement reminded everyone that my nameday was just under two months away, on the last day of high summer, and their bloodlust had risen accordingly. A fight to the death between Rival Heirs was both a source of entertainment and a chance to increase the strength of Myre through a Queen whose power must intimidate our enemies.

My mother had been the previous Queen's only daughter. It had been many years since the generation before hers, in which three sisters, triplets, had fought.

All of that was more than enough reason to avoid Isadore.

I continued forward, closing the distance between the courtiers and me. They'd drifted into my path and now the only thing to do was face my sister. I focused my gaze on the throne and Mother's spill of golden hair turning quicksilver as the sunlight hit it, but I wasn't truly seeing.

My skin began to itch and my heartbeat thumped in my fingertips, reminding me to breathe. Ten more steps and the courtiers surrounded me. Isadore's circle was tight and exclusive; all fifteen of her devoted sycophants were heirs to the most powerful Houses in Myre. I knew them all. We'd grown up together and had been close until I left.

I smiled and was pleased to find it held as their eyes swept from my slippered feet up to my diadem, sneers peeking out when polite expressions faltered. I bit my tongue, tasted blood, and smiled wider, deeper. Too quickly I found myself in the center of their circle. Dread through me with such startling intensity that my hands shook.

My elder sister's dark gold hair was swept over one shoulder, falling in soft waves around the sharp angles of her face. Isadore and I only vaguely looked alike. She looked like a younger copy of Mother. They had the same eyes, deep-set and flashy green, and Isadore's hair was gold to Mother's light blonde. They were both rail thin and shared the same slightly overlong but dignified noses. The main difference between them was Isadore's golden-brown skin—the combination of Mother's pale pink complexion and Papa's rich brown.

All I had of our mother was her heart-shaped mouth. The rest of me was of my father: his thick black curls, his broad face, full cheeks, and short, stocky form, which translated into some well-placed curves I was still getting used to. Only my eyes were my own: large, upturned, and a shocking blood orange. A coarse rumor started when I returned to Ternain had called them khimaer eyes. The rumor was quickly smothered by Mother, but it didn't matter. It was just another way they'd found to make me feel small and out of place, though they needn't have bothered. The main difference between me and everyone else at Court was that they used magick and I did not. There was nothing I could do to make up for that, so I'd stopped trying.

Isa's smile deepened as she cupped my cheek. I cupped hers, hoping my face didn't reflect the fear slowly filling me.

At Court it was customary to graze hands in greeting, but close family touched each other's faces, as a show of trust. Usually it was only a brief point of contact. Mother's fingers sweeping against my cheek, cold and stiff, was as familiar a feeling as anything. So was Papa's thumb sweeping over and pinching my one winking dimple. The first person to make contact was meant to first break it, but Isadore's hand settled into the contours of my cheeks and didn't move, nails digging into my skin slightly.

She inclined her head and I gasped.

Magick rose from her skin, silk soft, yet vibrating like lightning.

Two things happened in quick succession:

First the young courtiers swayed toward her like flowers seeking the sun. I searched for alarm in their expressions, but

all I could find were empty smiles. They should have been offended, disgusted she would use magick so casually to bend them to her will, but her magick of persuasion had them in its grip. There was nothing but blankness behind their eyes.

Yet no haze fell over my mind. I recognized the cloyingly sweet scent of Isadore's persuasion magick; she'd been using it since she was a child, bending my will to hers by accident before she learned to do it on purpose. She could convince a person to do almost anything, but this time she didn't even try.

Katro bent close, his cheek rubbing against mine. "Hello, Evalina. Are you well?"

The words hadn't come from Isadore's mouth, but they were spoken in her voice, each one furred and predatory like the spine of a jungle cat. I staggered into the courtier behind me. I twisted, an apology on my lips, but he only stared blankly.

The floor tilted beneath me.

*How?* I'd never seen this particular trick before, her treating people like puppets.

Her smile dropped and so did the magick. If Isadore's spine wasn't always ramrod straight, I wouldn't have noticed, but she sagged. Though she'd controlled that courtier, it had cost her.

"Breathe, Evalina," Isadore whispered, this time from her own lips. Her voice oozed with faux concern, so patronizing it would have been appropriate directed at a six-year-old in the midst of a tantrum. In truth I was on the verge of one. Only imagining the Court's reaction kept me from sprinting from the Throne Room as fast as I could.

I forced myself to speak. “Isadore. Are you well?”

“I am quite well actually.” She lifted her chin, lowering only her eyes as she spoke. “And you?”

“I am.” The lie rolled smoothly from my lips. I wanted to slap that simper off her face; she knew I hated that look, hated craning my neck to meet her gaze. “It is a lovely day. I hope it won’t grow any warmer. I’d hoped to ride along the river today.”

“Lovely,” she echoed, glancing down at her lacquered nails. “We plan to visit the pools later, once it cools a bit.”

“Well.” The moment hung. I wouldn’t have considered going to the pools, lest Isadore subject me to more conversation with her speaking from other people’s mouths. And yet I longed for her to at least offer an invitation.

Foolish that it stung.

“Will I see you tonight?” Her expression softened, eyes wide and green as the underside of a sand beetle’s wings. “Mother is hosting a dinner to celebrate the Blood Moon.”

Hope pulled me under like a drug. I could see what would happen: When I approached the throne, Mother would fold me into her arms. She would say the dinner would be hosted in my honor. She would tell me she loved me before the Court. She would repair our fractured family.

Except our mother would never do any of those things. She wouldn’t tell the Court she loved me, because she didn’t. And she certainly wouldn’t fix us, when she was the one who created the first cracks that left us shattered now.

The taste of caramel and oranges drizzled with honey bloomed on my tongue. Too sweet to be real, so thick I could

drown in it. This was Isadore's magick of persuasion, poisoning my thoughts.

I knew only one way to resist Isadore's magick once I was under its spell: pain.

"Remember, I know your tricks." I held up my hands, wet with blood from ten perfect half-moon cuts. "And the answer to your question is no. I have other plans tonight. Now if you'll excuse me . . ."

Isadore looked past me, smile deepening. "And what are those plans, sister?"

*To slip my chains and dance beneath a blood-drenched moon.*

Anger and exhaustion warred within me until I felt nothing at all. In the months since my return, Isadore had done everything in her power to intimidate me at Court. Usually it worked, but today I was too tired, my nerves still raw from last night.

"That's enough, Isa," I snapped, and for once the anger in my voice gave her pause. "I'm Rival Heir just like you. You may pretend that I'm less, but that won't change the truth, Isa."

"Who's pretending?" she said. "Your magick is feeble and useless. You haven't the loyalty of the Court. You are *less*. You left."

I tried not to flinch at the memories that dredged up. "Stop it."

"Why should I?"

"Your friends may let you use your magick on them, but what about the rest of the Court? If they find out that you use magick to earn their loyalty—"

“I don’t need anything to earn their loyalty. This is just practice.”

“If Papa knew, if Mama—”

“Papa isn’t here and Mother doesn’t care. All that matters to her is power and I have it. She’d probably encourage you to use your magick as well if it wouldn’t result in you accidentally killing everyone in some mad accident.”

Air hissed out of my mouth, her words like a punch to the gut. A memory flashed through my mind, but I smothered it. “You know I can’t use my magick.”

She inclined her head. “That’s exactly why you should have stayed away. You don’t belong here and, lucky for me, you never will.”

I looked into her eyes, hoping to find some sense of shame, or even pleasure. But she wasn’t savoring the taste of this small cruelty—her eyes were flat with truth. If I had any question as to whether saying such things cost her anything, the answer was clear.

The bitter part was that the same sentiment crossed my mind every day. I didn’t belong here. I didn’t even want to belong here. If I’d been allowed to stay away from the capital, to let my nameday pass without mention, I would have done so, but the law was very clear.

*All daughters born to the Queen will become Rival Heirs. As Raina the First slew her sister, so shall a Princess in each generation sacrifice her kin in a show of strength. The victor will become the True Heir to be crowned the following year.*

This was our birthright: to kill and become Queen, or die.

It became more obvious with every passing day which of

us would live out the rest of our life perched on the Ivory Throne.

I wanted to run, to feel my feet slap the cool marble floors, to pull out every pin forcing my hair into submission, and to wrench the jeweled bangles from my wrists. But instead I moved on, searching for Falun's bright head, I couldn't help but look at Mother. I had her attention now. Her eyes tracked me across the room, studying me, lips curled into a vacant frown. The barest smile crossed her face. Her contempt washed over me, cold and familiar.

*Damn Isa. Damn this place.*

If I were meant for this—being Princess and one day Queen—I would have had the strength to stay. I would have swallowed it all back and marched toward my mother.

But no.

For today, one conversation with Isadore had been more than enough.

I startled as Falun's hand settled against the small of my back, and let him guide me from the room. The crier, lips pressed into thin disapproval, wouldn't meet my gaze.

No tears escaped until the doors slammed shut behind us. I held to that victory hours later, eyes finally dry, alone in my room.

## ➤ CHAPTER 3 ➤

“OUT WITH IT.” Mirabel stabbed her knife into one of the petite hens she had brought for lunch. With her other hand, she pulled the hem of her skirt over her lizard feet. In the soft afternoon light, her scales shifted between teal and jade.

She was half khimaer; the slight gazelle horns spiraling back from her brow marked her as much as her feet. Physically, humans, bloodkin, and fey were mostly the same, besides a few minor differences, like the bloodkins’ fangs and the feys’ pointed ears. The khimaer on the other hand were graced with horns, and shared physical attributes with animals—wings, tails, talons, and the like.

Outside my bedchamber, Mirabel wore long skirts. Luckily her feet were easy enough to hide; had she possessed more obvious animal aspects, she wouldn’t have been allowed inside the Queen’s Palace, let alone around me. It was the Queen’s unspoken policy to hire only khimaer with mixed blood to work in the Palace.

An hour ago, I came back from Court to find her in my

sitting room meeting with two young men. One was blood-kin and brown-skinned with fangs that seemed too large for his mouth, and the other, a human with sea-green tattoos. They'd gaped at me, stammering greetings as Mira hustled them out the door with instructions not to be seen near my rooms.

Last year, when we returned to the capital, Mirabel had created a network of spies—ghosts, we called them—because knowledge was power. If secrets were coins, she always said, they would be gold.

She didn't look like much of a spymaster. Her round, beautiful face was cut with deep lines from decades of frowning and laughing. In a cotton blouse and bright-patterned skirt and with not one hair out of place in her iron-gray bun, she could have been my grandmother, but for her horns.

I rarely saw our spies; recognizing a face I had no business knowing could endanger them. Even Mira rarely met with them in person.

I'd been ready to ask her to leave with them before she shoved a tray of food under my nose. Only then did I notice I was starving. Mirabel always remembered such things. When I forgot to eat, she was there to bring me a meat pie or spiced mazi fruit.

I folded flatbread smeared with chili paste around a slice of the hen and I groaned as smoky heat filled my mouth.

"I received word from the King. As the two of you discussed before we left Asrodei, he's increasing the number of soldiers in your guard leading up to your nameday. The first should arrive within the week."

I gave a noncommittal grunt. Another thing I didn't

want, someone new to follow me around the Palace. How I regretted agreeing to add more soldiers to the guard. If I'd known that returning to Ternain would mean I wouldn't be left alone unless to sleep, I might not have agreed to it. But it was necessary; contests of Rival Heirs were dangerous leading up to the challenge. Though the Entwining spell ensured that only we could strike the killing blow, heirs had been kidnapped before. Kidnapped and starved until they were too delirious with hunger to win a fight.

"Eva," Mirabel pressed, gaze soft as she awaited an answer. "What happened at Court?"

I set my food aside, appetite lost. "I don't want to discuss it, Mira."

This seemed just the opening she intended. "I'll talk then, if you'll allow that. This morning you woke on your own. I usually have to drag you out of bed before Court, but not today."

"I couldn't sleep." That was close enough to the truth anyway. "I thought you'd be pleased I was up early."

"I was until you came back hours before I was expecting you. Tell me what happened." She brushed her fingertips across my cheek, wiping away a rogue tear.

This tenderness was so unlike her. Though Mirabel was once my nursemaid, now her duties varied between adviser, spymaster, and near-mother all in one. And just like my real mother, she wasn't one for comfort.

She solved military dilemmas for my father when she was bored and favored jeweled hairpins that doubled as blades. She complained about my recklessness as she mended tears in my clothing, and taught me ciphers and how to survive if

stranded in the desert. She wasn't good at softness and neither was I. I never cried in front of her. I never cried in front of anyone—or at all—if I could help it.

The black leather-bound book where she kept all her golden secrets sat beside her on the floor of my bedchamber. She opened it and held up a white card. “A courier came by while you were at Court. Your mother sent an invitation to a dinner she’s hosting for the Blood Moon, which . . . surprised me.”

I snorted as I plucked it from Mira’s hand. I traced the illustration of a crimson moon on the back of the card. Mother must have sent it before I’d stormed out of the Throne Room. “Lovely. Shall we pick out something to wear? It’s much too late to have a dress made, which I’m sure was her intention, but I must have something to suit the occasion. Red for the Blood Moon? Cobalt for House Killeen? Perhaps sea-foam for my mother, the Storm Queen? Honestly,” I added, “the red should be for Killeen or for the throne, for all the blood spilled in its name.”

Mirabel cringed, but said nothing.

I filled her silence. “I can’t go back there. I have less than two months left and I don’t want to spend those weeks at Court.”

“Your mother won’t like that.”

“Whatever punishment she devises is sure to be better than being dissected like a moth under glass at Court. That’s hardly a way to spend the last days of my life.”

“Stop with that foolishness. You’ll live well beyond your nameday.”

“How, Mirabel?” I snapped. “You must have at least one ghost at Court. Haven’t they told you about Isadore? One

flex of her will and she won't even have to kill me herself. I'll be burying the knife inside my own chest."

Her chestnut skin went ashen. Maybe the image flashed behind her eyes the way it flashed behind mine. My body broken, battered, and all that I was, gone from it. Forever.

"You are not going to die. You're going to sit on the Ivory Throne and change this Queendom."

"I wish you were right. I can't even change how the Court sees me. How can I change anything else?"

"You certainly won't if you don't at least go to Court and try."

"Today Isadore admitted she uses her magick to turn courtiers against me, and that Mama"—I gritted my teeth—"Mother encourages it. What do you suppose I try against that?"

She waved a hand in dismissal. "Your father will find something soon. We must remain hopeful. There are still stones left to turn. North near the border, or the Isles. The Deadened Jungle, even. Anyplace where old magicks are known to return."

The magick Mirabel and my father so wanted me to learn was not like Isadore's, nor like my mother's. Magick of marrow and blood was a killing power. How could she want me to embrace that? I refused to let the crown turn me into a murderer.

Better to die than be like every other Queen.

I ignored the spike of panic in my chest. "Just accept that there is no one to teach me."

Searching would yield nothing, just as it had for the last three years. My magick was a relic from another age. Papa

would never find someone to teach me. Anyone who might've known about marrow and bone magick was long dead.

I used to count that failing as a gift, since I couldn't be forced to learn, but as my nameday drew closer and closer, all I felt was numb. It was clear that I was helpless against my sister. Why worry when my fate was inescapable? I wouldn't be the first Princess to die, nor the last.

Mirabel's claws rasped against the floor as she stood and gripped my hands tight. Her beringed fingers were tough, sturdy. These hands fed me, clothed me, and combed my hair. They had held me every day since my first nameday nearly seventeen years ago. I knew the feel of them well.

"I will not give up, and I won't allow you to either. I'll remind you every chance I get, even if you don't want to hear it: you deserve to live, you deserve to fight, and you deserve to survive. The throne, all its glory and bitterness, is your birthright. Don't let your sister convince you you're worth anything less." She pressed a kiss to my cheek and swept from the room.

I tried to see the truth in Mirabel's words, but I knew better. I didn't deserve the crown. I didn't even want it, and against Isadore I had no way to win.



The first, and only, time I used magick I was just shy of my ninth nameday.

For human Myreans, the ninth nameday was second only to the seventeenth in importance. It marked the time when we could be tattooed by the Sorceryn and given access to our

magick. Though unbridled magick often spilled out of children before their ninth year, it couldn't be learned until our arms wore a lace of ink, each design articulating a different ability.

Though I remembered several days of feasting for Isadore's ninth, I waited and waited only to find no celebration was planned for mine. My first clue to understanding why came during Court a week before my nameday.

I sat on the dais, Isadore and I arranged on a large pillow at Mother's feet, like we always were back then at Court. She liked to keep us close enough to pinch when we misbehaved. Lady Feransa, Mistress of Trade on Queen's Council, mounted the dais to speak with the Queen. After a brief conversation, Mother dismissed her, and on her way down the dais, Feransa spoke to my sister first, asking after Isa's lessons with the Sorceryn. Then Lady Feransa turned to me and pinched my cheek, before taking my hands in hers.

Her kohl-rimmed eyes focused on the portrait of Raina behind the throne. "You must be a brave girl," she murmured shakily, "to be gifted with such savage magick, Your Highness."

My gaze followed hers. The First had golden-brown skin and amber eyes lit with rage, and wore a gold sleeveless gown, dotted with red rosettes, showing off the tattoos that stretched from fingertips to shoulder.

Trying not to feel the sting of Lady Feransa's words, I couldn't look away. I would know soon if my tattoos were to be the same.

Isadore saved me from having to answer when she spoke

in a tight, quiet voice: “Yes, my sister is brave, as all Princesses are known to be, but she is not savage.”

At just eleven, Isa had a commanding way about her and a glare that shined with cruelty.

She smiled in triumph as the Mistress of Trade sputtered an apology, backing away until she reached the foot of the dais. My eyes welled with tears as Lady Feransa took one last glance at the portrait of Raina. My thoughts spun through memories of times my magick had been mentioned at Court, finding that same fearful expression, and finally understood. The Court wasn’t celebrating my ninth because they were frightened by it.

Frightened by *me*.

When Feransa was well away, Isa pulled up her sleeve and showed me a tattoo of a bright green serpent coiled around her wrist. I knew it was one of her persuasion tattoos, because the tattoos for her light magick were all pale yellow.

“Once you’re tattooed,” she promised, jade eyes burning with a fire to match Raina’s, “you can chase away anyone who bothers you. Until then, I’ll protect you.”

Two nights later, she kept that promise.

It was late enough that we should have been fast asleep, sharing a fort draped with silk, curled together on a heap of pillows. Instead we’d crept through the passages from Isa’s room to the kitchens, collecting sticky buns and candied almonds to nibble on during our journey through the passages. Isa decided we should go to Mother’s dressing room to try out her jewels and gowns without someone chasing us away from all the finery.

But when we arrived in her dressing room, Mama was still awake on the otherside of the door, the lamplight from her bedchamber spilling under the doorway. Whispering excitedly, for this was a thrilling and dangerous development, I suggested we stay, while Isa proposed a climb to the glass menagerie on the roof. I deferred to Isa, as I always did then and we would have left had I not heard Papa's voice. It was a curious discovery, for neither of us had ever seen Papa near Mama's rooms. We crept closer to the door leading to her bedchamber, our fingers laced together.

I could hardly make out anything, but one word stood out: my name.

I rushed forward, untangling my hand from Isa's, but she pulled me back. "Eva," she said, so loud I thought she wanted to get caught. "What are they saying?"

"They're talking about me." I pressed my ear to the door.

Not one to let me hear anything she couldn't, Isa shouldered me aside. She grinned, listening with me now.

Mama's voice was pitched high with agitation. "She is too young. We need to wait, Lei. I know you believe she's ready, but—"

Papa cut her off, tone sharp. "Lily, waiting is too dangerous."

"Her magick is what's dangerous, Lei." I pressed my lips together to stifle a gasp. "You know the history better than I do. Eva could hurt someone—"

"I understand your fear, but that magick is hers, Lily. It is who she is." Papa's voice softened. "Even you cannot keep her from it."

The pit of nerves in my stomach hardened. Lady Feran-

sa's words echoed in my head. *Savage magick*, she'd said. I thought of Raina's tattoos, with blood red roses, blades, and bones, how could I do anything but hurt someone. I wanted to run, but I couldn't turn away. I pressed even closer, wishing I could slip right through the door and see.

"I can keep her from whatever I damn well please, Lei."

"Do not press this. This is interference, Lily. I won't take it, not this early. You may favor Isa all you like, but this is sabotage."

"I won't let her endanger my Isadore." All the sweets we'd eaten threatened to bubble up as my stomach churned. My magick was why Mama preferred Isa—because she thought I'd hurt someone. But even if I could, I wondered why would I hurt my sister? Back then I didn't know our fate as Rival Heirs and wouldn't learn the truth for years. "I won't have her learning this . . . this barbaric power. I won't."

"You know nothing of this so-called barbaric power," Papa said. "That is why you fear it."

"I've spoken with the Sorceryn." The sly calm in her voice was so different from the anger seconds ago. Even knowing she couldn't see me, I didn't dare breathe. "They say—"

Isa yanked me back and I missed Mother's next words. "We should go, Eva."

I needed to hear the rest. Maybe Mama was right. I needed to understand so that I wouldn't hurt Isa. Fear and desperation warred within me as I shoved her away, Raina's red-and-white tattoos vivid in my mind's eye.

Isa was two years older than me, taller and stronger, and always won any tussles between us. Still she fell to the floor and a soft cry escaped her.

Then a strange thing happened. My thoughts circled back, realizing that my hand had felt hot when it connected with Isa's chest. Isa's flesh had given under my fingertips with a dull pop, sinking in like a piece of overripe fruit.

I rushed toward her. "Are you all right?"

She'd fallen, curled in on herself, and didn't respond to my words. I crouched and reached for her. She flinched as my fingers brushed her shoulder and gave me a bewildered look. My mind flashed to the kitten with the twisted leg we had found last month. He'd twitched away from our every touch. Even after we led him up to my room and gave him a cup of cream, he never lost that suspicion. Like he knew somebody would hurt him again. Like it was only a matter of time.

Tears slid down my face.

I didn't understand what I'd done, but with Mother's words about endangering Isadore ringing in my head, I knew this power was *wrong*.

Isadore stood and tried to cover my mouth. There was a bruise on one of her arms, so dark it looked like a splotch of spilled paint or the petal of a purple flower.

"Hush, Eva." She said it over and over. When the door swung open, hitting her in the back and causing her to stumble to the floor and cry out in pain *again*, she kept repeating it. "Eva, don't tell them. Not about anything. Don't say a word."

I only wept harder, unable to speak around the force of my tears. Isa ignored all of their questions. She spoke only once, coolly requesting a healer.

After that Mama glared at Papa, hovering protectively over Isadore. "Leave us."

My cries took on a hysterical edge as my father scooped me into his arms. I didn't want to be separated from Isadore, because soon Mama would know what I'd done. And I was sure she would never let me be around my sister again.

Over the sound of my hiccupping, I heard Isa say again and again, "Hush, Eva. Don't tell them anything. Don't say a word."

And so I never did.

Instead I decided. This was my magick, wicked, savage, and wrong, and I wanted no part of it.



After Mira left, I passed the evening alone, reading a book of myths from the Isles instead of accepting my mother's invitation. My nerves couldn't handle seeing her or anyone else from Court tonight.

When night dropped inky curtains of starlight, I slid from my bed. Remembering the City Guard from last night, I hid an extra knife in my boot, and opened the trapdoor. Falun waited below. I took off before he could say a word, lest he mention the disaster at Court.

We stopped on the stoop of an abandoned building in a familiar alleyway on the edge of the Patch. Not wanting a repeat of last night, we agreed to meet there at the end of the night if we were separated. Falun said he'd only come along to stop me from going out alone, though I was certain the young bloodkin had at least some small part in him not hauling me back to the my room. With the Blood Moon, there would be no raids tonight. Omen sightings and festival

nights were the only times the laws against late night gatherings became void.

Falun was quiet on the way out; maybe he wanted to talk about Court. Maybe his mother had said something that upset him, but he'd had to worry about me instead. I should have asked, I would have, but I didn't want to mention Court out there. Not when we were free.

"You haven't looked at it once," Falun said.

He was wrong. I'd glanced at the moon twice. The first time it was just a glance, but the second, I truly took it in. A rich, bloodied moon hung in the sky, bruised with black shadows and bathing the night with a strange, rosy glow. It was so close if I climbed one of the taller flats around us, I would've sworn I could touch the edge.

But after that I didn't let my eyes linger at the wonder of it. The Blood Moon had betrayed me once before, heaping its legendary expectations upon my infant shoulders. "The moon means nothing to me tonight. I'm just a girl, remember?"

He must've caught something in my voice. "Is that why you come here? To leave your titles behind?"

I shrugged, unable to meet his pitying gaze. "I come here to pretend that I'm free from the throne for just a little while." To pretend that the moon's omens didn't matter. That my title didn't matter, at least for this short time.

I pulled him along, and made a promise to myself: Princess no more.

The silence between us was broken only when Falun asked how I'd originally found the Patch.

My secret forays outside the Palace began seven months ago, at the beginning of Far Winter, when I was still settling

into life here. I wanted to know the city I was supposed to rule one day. I had always loved the night, but Ternain taught me its true magick: transformation. I could be whomever I wanted at night, as long as I was careful.

It took several weeks of wandering through the city to find the Patch, and two more weeks of slipping through its crowds to find my place in it.

I'd been wrapped in a cloak, afraid someone would recognize me, when I'd stumbled upon a crowd of people gathered around the tiles. I slid through the press of bodies and found the crowd watching a pair of dancers. My feet were rooted to the ground as I watched a bloodkin boy and girl circling each other.

They were beautiful, as anyone is who is sweating in the night with moonlight; in their skin, all worries seemed forgotten. Waist-length braids spun around her lithe body, and long coils of hair sprung proudly from his brow all the while they moved, barely a hand's-width apart.

They were one in the dance.

Hips rolled and feet slapped the ground as they twined around each other, two moons in the same orbit. Perfectly in sync.

Chatara wasn't dancing, not as I'd always known it. Yes, there was music and yes, there was movement, but the intimacy of it made me blush the first time I watched. At Court we had nothing to match its intensity.

I found I couldn't look away.

Eventually their song ended. Everyone rushed onto the tiles when the drumming started. I stood frozen. During the dance a fire was lit under my skin. Every other night

I'd been looking, seeing all the sectors of Ternain up close, but tonight I wanted to be a part of it. There weren't just bloodkin crowded onto the tiles, there were fey, long rope-like braids woven around their wrists, and humans, tattoos scrawled on their arms.

I wanted to lose myself among them. I wanted—*wanted*.

Since returning to Ternain, it was the first time I had wanted anything but to be left alone.

As I stared, the dancing boy caught my eyes. A slow smile curved his lips, and a tremor snaked down my back. *Oh*.

Warmth bloomed in my cheeks as he motioned for me to join him. My gaze drifted to his open shirt and broad, sweat-damp chest. I stepped forward before I remembered myself. Remembered who I was; much as I wanted to be someone else, I hadn't yet learned to pretend. I didn't know how to smile and join him, much as I wanted to. I didn't know how to lose myself in the embrace of someone so beautiful. At least not yet.

I rushed back to the Palace, but I returned the next night, clad in a scrap of a shirt and a long, clinging skirt instead, determined to learn.

In the months since, the Patch had become my only true solace. When all the things I despised in my life piled up, I could come here to forget them for a few hours.

Tonight, as always, the streets smelled of honey, liquor, and because it was the Patch, blood.

Because of the moon, it was more packed than last night. Falun jostled a human boy nursing a cup of palm beer while a copper-haired bloodkin girl laid a tarnished bloodletting knife against his wrist. Clearly surprised to see bloodkin feed-

ing in public, Falun murmured an apology. The boy blushed, but the girl kissed both of us on the cheek.

We reached the tiles in the midst of a round of chatara, so we waited. I saw Falun spot the boy from last night—a hot flush rose in his cheeks—but he stayed by my side.

I pushed him onto the tiles. “Go.”

After that dance ended, I stepped onto the tiles alone.

When the music started, my thoughts were usually carried away, and there was only my body and eventually whichever boy would join me.

But tonight peace wouldn’t come.

I couldn’t help but look to the moon, and as soon as I did, it was like someone placed a brick on my chest. The moon only reminded me of all the things I had come here to forget. Like Court, this wasn’t my place either. I was as weak and forgettable here as anywhere else and a small voice whispered it was no one’s fault but mine.

The wrongness of it thrummed beneath my skin, discordant and harsh against the sound of the chatara drums.

Only when a boy with a vaguely familiar face joined me, his hands coming around my waist to spin me to and fro, could I sink into the heat of his touch and the rush of being no more than a girl dancing with a boy.

The truth—that this was as false as the facade I wore in the Queen’s Palace—was too thorny and painful to touch.

I threw my mind and body into the music, drank a few welcome sips of ouitza, and let the heat of him leak into me, forcing everything else away.

*Princess no more*, I swore. Just an ordinary girl dancing in the Patch, not the ill-suited Rival Heir. *Princess no more*.

Those words went on echoing in my head even after I stopped dancing. Hours later, I ended where my night began, letting the moonlight wash over me while I waited for Falun on the stoop. I strung together a song beneath my breath; I barely knew what it was about. Just a boy, a girl, and a boat where the Red River met the Silvern Sea.

Air stirred beside me. “Fal,” I said, “would you ever be with someone common? Not for a night, but forever? Jessypha wouldn’t like it, but—”

When the blade kissed my neck, the rest of the words died on my lips.

*Princess no more.*

I laughed even as ice slid through my veins. Blunt fingers ran through my curls, jerking my head back, and the dagger bit into my skin until hot blood dripped down my neck. My eyes rolled up to find a man staring at me, a fixed smile on his face.

“I need to get a good look at you,” a rough voice grated. A hand replaced the knife, smearing the blood down my neck and chest in a sickening caress. “Wouldn’t want to kill the wrong princess.”

The words echoed in my head, distorted by panic. *Kill the . . . kill the wrong Princess?*

All the air punched out of my chest as I stared at him. I sucked in a breath, and did the only thing I could think of: I screamed.