

# THIRTEEN YEARS AGO



*Maybe today will be different.*

*For three peals of the chimes above the gatehouse, the boy has been playing with others. Six of them. Never has he been addressed by so many his age. Certainly, he has never been allowed in a game of fox and hen.*

*And certainly he has never smiled this much. His cheeks ache from the grinning, but he can't stop.*

*Lizl is catching up. She's the fox in this round, and the boy is the only hen left. She laughs. The boy laughs. It feels good, swelling in his chest. Bubbling up his throat like the spring behind the dormitories.*

*He can't remember if he's ever laughed before today. He hopes this game never ends.*

*Lizl catches up. She's older, longer-legged, and nimble in a way none of the other acolytes are. The boy overheard his mentor discussing yesterday that they might move her up to the next level of training.*

*Lizl's hand slams onto the boy's shoulder. "Caught you!" Her fingers dig into the loose linen of his monastery tunic. She yanks back, forcing the boy to stop.*

*He laughs, a high, gleeful sound. Even the muscles in his stomach hurt now, and his cheeks—oh, his cheeks!*

*Which is why it takes him a moment to notice that Lizl is no longer moving. He's too happy for the monster inside to be waking up.*

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*But then one of the other acolytes—Kerta, who'd been the first hen caught—calls, "Lizl? Are you all right?"*

*The boy realizes what's happening. Panic takes hold, his mind blanking out. His stomach shoveling low.*

*Let go, he tells himself. Let go, let go, let go. If he doesn't, Lizl is going to die, just like his dog died. But this is worse than losing Boots. This is a person. This is a girl he was playing with only moments ago. This is Lizl.*

*"What's wrong with her?" Kerta closes in, not yet alarmed. Merely confused.*

*Let go, let go, let go.*

*"Why isn't she moving?"*

*The boy stumbles back. "Please," he says to the monster inside. Or perhaps he's addressing Lizl. Or Kerta. Anyone who will make the girl's blood pump again.*

*If it doesn't, Lizl's brain will stop working. She will die.*

*Just like Boots.*

*Kerta notes the boy's terror now, and the other children start noticing too. "What did you do?" one boy demands.*

*"Did you hurt her?" another asks.*

*"Bloodwitch," declares the third, a bully named Natan, and that's when the boy sees it: the sudden understanding that flashes in their eyes. The collective hitching of their breaths and recoiling of their necks.*

*Now they know why the other children won't play with him. Now they know why he's trained separately from other acolytes, alone with Monk Evrane.*

*It doesn't matter that seconds later Lizl coughs and crumples to the stones. It doesn't matter that she lives and the monster has gone. It doesn't matter that this was an accident, that the boy would never have hurt her on purpose.*

*The damage is done. The smiles are gone. The shouting, the fleeing, the hate—it's all starting again, as it always does.*

*They throw rocks after him as he races for the spring behind the dormitory. An old well no one uses anymore. It is overgrown with thorns that only he, with his wounds that always heal, can charge through.*

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*Streaks of pain cut through his awareness. This shrub has fangs. It distracts, as does the drip-drip of blood once he reaches the water.*

*He sinks to his haunches on the stone shore, ashamed when more than blood splashes the cold waters. Crying, he knows, is not what monks do.*

*Worse than the tears, though, worse than the thorns' vicious bite and worse than the welts from the children's rocks, are the sore muscles in the boy's cheeks. A reminder of what he almost had. Of what he had had for a few perfect hours.*

*He was born a monster, he will die a monster, and monsters do not get to have friends.*

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# ONE



The blood looked fresh in the rain.

Weeping, oozing, even streaming in some places, the water from the storm hit wounds on corpses that had been stagnant for days. The granite bedrock would not accept the offering, and a river of blood slid downhill, following the terrain, gathering around Aeduan's boots. So many blood-scents to mingle against his magic, so many dead for his gaze to drag across.

This was the third massacre he'd found in two weeks. The third time he'd followed carnage on the air, the third time he'd smelled wet caves and white-knuckled grips amidst the slaughter. He was catching up to the attackers.

Catching up to his father's men.

The four stabs in Aeduan's abdomen spurted with each of his hunched breaths. He should have left the arrows where they'd hit, let the Threadwitch remove them with her careful hands instead of yanking them out as soon as they'd punched through stomach wall. Twenty years of habit were hard to change in just two weeks, though.

He also hadn't expected the barbs.

Aeduan sucked in a ragged breath, rain coursing into his open mouth. There was nothing to keep him here, and the scent he'd hoped to find—the one he'd followed for two weeks, ever deeper into the

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Sirmayans—was not nearby. Oh, the summer heather and impossible choices that marked her blood had been here, but she had moved on. Before the attack, he assumed, or she too would now be numbered among the dead.

Before Aeduan could turn away from the corpses and limp for the evergreen forest whence he'd come, a new blood-scent tickled against his nose. Vaguely familiar, as if he had once met the owner and bothered to catalog the man's blood, but had never tucked it aside to remember forever.

The smell was sharp. Still alive.

Between one heartbeat and the next, Aeduan changed course. Thirty-four careful steps over gape-mouthed bodies. Rain sprayed into his eyes, forcing him to blink again and again. Then the stone expanse gave way to a mossy carpet stained to red. More bodies, all ages, all angles, covered the earth with a density that spoke of attempted escape. The square Nomatsi shields on their backs, though, had done nothing to stop the ambush from the front.

Blood, blood and empty eyes everywhere he looked.

Onward he picked across the bodies until at last he reached the swaying conifers. The scent he'd caught was thicker here, but the pine-needle floor was also slippery, dangerous from the storm. Aeduan had no desire to fall. He might heal from every scrape, every broken bone, but that did not mean it wouldn't hurt.

Or drain his magic further, which was the problem now. Stomach wounds were particularly unwieldy to repair.

Aeduan inhaled. Exhaled. Counting, waiting, watching as his blood dribbled out and the world fell away. He was not his mind. He was not his body.

He kept moving.

But then, over distant thunderclaps from the south, he heard a human groan. "Help." With that word, his senses sharpened, his spine straightened, and a new energy kicked in.

He strode faster. Rain splashed beneath his boots. Thunder rolled to the south. He followed a path through the spruce trees, their trunks creaking like ships at sea; he knew this was a Nomatsi road. He knew

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that traps like the one he'd triggered beside the morning glories likely waited ahead.

"Help."

The voice was weaker, but closer—as was the scent of the dying man's blood. A monk, Aeduan realized, when at last he crossed a dip in the path where a stream swelled with storm. Three steps up the rocky hill, a fallen white robe lay stained to rusty brown. And three steps beyond, with his back pressed against a fallen log, the robe's owner clutched at wounds in his belly.

Wounds like Aeduan's, that had come from traps meant to protect the Nomatsi tribe. Unlike Aeduan, though, this man had not removed the arrows.

For half a moment, Aeduan thought he could help the man. That he could use what remained of his own power to stop the man's bleeding. He had done it before with Evrane; he could do it again. The vast city of Tirla was no more than half a day away.

But even if Aeduan could sustain such power in his current state, there could be no healing the sword gash on the monk's thigh. The femoral artery was split wide, and though rain fell hard enough to clear away blood, the artery gushed faster.

The man had only minutes left to live.

"Demon," the man burred. Blood seeped from the edges of his mouth down his seamed chin, riding the rain. "I . . . remember you."

"Who did this?" Aeduan asked. There was no time to be wasted on names or useless memories. If anyone had been trained for death, it was the Carawens. And if anyone could help Aeduan make sense of this slaughter, it was the dying man before him.

"Purists."

Aeduan blinked. Rain splattered off his lashes. The Purists, though foul members of humanity, were not known for violence. Except . . .

Except when Purists were not Purists at all.

"Help," the man begged, clutching at the wound across his thigh.

At that sight, anger thickened in Aeduan's throat. Mercenary monks faced the Void's embrace without fear, without begging. To see desperation darken the man's eyes—it was wrong. All wrong.

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Yet Aeduan still found his magic reaching out. Spiraling around the white fire and iron ore that made the monk who he was. A pointless endeavor, for there was so little blood left inside the man's veins it felt like trying to catch wind. No matter how tightly he grasped, his magic always came up empty.

"Why did you not use your stone?" Aeduan asked, and he glared at the man's ear. At the Carawen opal that glistened there, waiting to summon other monks in case of an emergency.

The man shook his head, a bare trace of movement. "Sur . . . prise." The word came out choked with blood, his face paler and paler with each breath. "Trained . . . better."

*Impossible*, Aeduan wanted to say. *No one is trained better than a Carawen mercenary*. But then the man started coughing and reached for his mouth, and Aeduan realized he bore the burn-flecked hands of a blacksmith, the lopsided shoulders of a man who worked the forge.

An artisanal monk. The least combat-ready of all the Carawens. Why was this man here at all, away from the monastery and away from his post?

Aeduan's lips parted to ask, but before the words could rise, the monk's final breath escaped from punctured lungs. His heart slowed to silence. All life vanished from his blood.

And Aeduan was left staring at yet another corpse rotting beneath the rain.

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## TWO



Iseult thought he might not be coming back. All night, she had waited—since dusk, when Aeduan had first strode off to inspect the path ahead.

The sun set, the moon rose, the rain came. The moon set, the rain subsided. Until at last, mist and dawn laid claim to the mountainside. Still, Aeduan did not appear.

Logically, Iseult knew it was unlikely that he would *never* return. After everything that they had been through together, why would he abandon her now? Two weeks, he had stayed by her side. Two weeks he had guided Owl and Iseult higher into the Sirmayans with neither payment nor prod to force him onward.

Viscerally, though, Iseult could find a thousand reasons the Bloodwitch would never return. A thousand excuses from coin to company for why he'd strode into the foggy forest at dusk and why he might never come back.

The story that shone brightest though, as the sun's first rays clambered over mountain peaks, was that he was kept away not by choice, but by captor. Or injury.

*Or death.*

That possibility sent her pacing on the gravel clearing beside their campsite. Ten steps one way. Pivot. Ten steps the other. Pivot. She

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never left sight of the narrow entrance leading to a dry, cozy cave of Owl's creation. Inside, the girl's mountain bat, Blueberry, curled fiercely around the child's sleeping form, leaving little space for anyone else.

Not that Iseult could have slept had she been in there too. Sleep had been her enemy for days now. Ever since the fire and the voice that controlled it had slithered into her dreams. *Burn them*, whispered a leering face consumed by flame. Each night he came to her. *Burn them all*.

She had tried to cleave him in her sleep. Tried to sever his Threads and corrupt his fire magic, just as she had done in her waking in the Contested Lands, but the man had only laughed while the flames swept higher. Flames that were all too real, as she'd learned that first night, when Aeduan had roused her. *A stray ember from the campfire*, he'd said, *and too much kindling nearby*.

Iseult had not bothered to contradict him. She also had not slept again, and that lack of sleep had left her with no means to speak to Esme about why this was happening. About *why* the Firewitch she had killed now seemed to live inside her.

No exhaustion burned in Iseult's eyes tonight, though. She wanted to leave—wanted to walk between those pines exactly as Aeduan had done at dusk and search every corner of the shadowy terrain even if she knew it would be a fruitless hunt: Aeduan was too skilled to leave tracks behind.

Besides, she could hardly leave Owl.

Either Aeduan would return or he would not, and Iseult would keep marching back and forth until she had her answer.

Iseult heard him approach before she saw him. It was so unlike the ever-cautious Bloodwitch that she actually drew a cutlass from the sheath at her waist. There were bears in these woods. Mountain cats, too. And unlike humans, they bore no Threads—no colors to tendrils and twirl above them, telling Iseult what they felt and to whom they were bound.

It was no Threadless animal that stumbled from the tree line, though, but the Threadless Bloodwitch instead. The instant she saw

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Aeduan's Carawen cloak brightening the shadows between the trees, cool relief crumbled through her. Until she realized something was wrong.

He limped from the forest, and his eyes, when they slid up to hers, were hooded and lost. "They're all dead." The proclamation came out hoarse and low. Aeduan swayed.

The relief in her belly splintered to horror. He was hurt. Badly.

Without another thought, Iseult shot toward him and swooped an arm behind his back—where her hand met rain-soaked fletching and arrows. Countless bolts erupted from him like the spines of a sea urchin, and now that she looked, his cloak was shredded and stained to brown.

Aeduan listed into her; his breath came in short gasps. His crystal eyes swirled red. Whatever was happening, he clearly would not stay upright much longer, and Iseult didn't want him passing out on top of her. Right where Owl could walk out and see him. The girl had a tendency to shatter the earth when she was upset.

*There's a spring uphill,* Iseult thought, a crude plan cobbling together. *I can clean him there without Owl finding us, and I can dry his clothes in the morning sun.* She just had to keep Aeduan from slipping into unconsciousness before they reached the water.

With aching slowness, she guided Aeduan up the hillside. His eyelids fluttered, his feet dragged. Each step sent the ice in her belly knotting wider. As did each arrow she counted—seventeen in total. More than enough to kill a regular man, but Aeduan was no regular man.

Still, Iseult had seen him hit with double this many bolts before. There was something else happening here. Something deeply wrong. For some reason, he did not seem to be healing. His Bloodwitchery was not squelching or cleaning, it was not ejecting arrows and knitting him back together as she had seen it do before.

"Are you hurt somewhere else?" Iseult pitched the question into his ear. *Stay awake, stay awake.* "Is there a wound I cannot see?"

"Arrows." The answer slurred out. Useless.

She changed tactics. "Is this injury why you took so long to return?"

A grunt, a vague nod. Then: "Survivor."

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Iseult tensed. “The woman from Owl’s tribe?” Aeduan had followed the woman’s scent for almost two weeks now. Twice, they had found these massacres, and twice, the woman’s scent had continued on. This latest would mark the third instance. But when Iseult searched Aeduan’s face for answers, all she got were pallid cheeks and harsh exhales.

“Was the woman there?” she pressed. Still no answer, though, so she let it go. They had reached the spring—thank the Moon Mother—and Iseult’s exhaustion was catching up fast. Fear could only sustain a tired body for so long.

Iseult led Aeduan to a low boulder beside the spring’s clear pool. The creek that trickled down the mountain had doubled in size overnight, thanks to the rain. With every muscle tensed, she eased Aeduan into a sitting position. A moan escaped his throat. Pain slashed across his face; she could hear his teeth grinding.

Even in the worst flames of the battlefield, even in the sea-swept moonlight beside a lighthouse, she had never seen him wear such suffering. Gripping his shoulder to keep him upright, she circled behind him. She would have to cut the cloak off if she wanted to keep this clean—

“Hurry,” he said, and with that command, Iseult gave up any hope of avoiding a mess. There was no time to lose. She just hoped Owl would not wake soon.

She gripped the first arrow and yanked. Minuscule barbs shredded flesh, and blood sprayed. Aeduan hissed, head tipping back, as one by one, Iseult snapped the arrows from his flesh, and a pile of bloodied white feathers and cedar gathered by her ankles.

By the time she removed the last, his white cloak was streaked with fresh red. His spine slumped, and the only thing keeping him from falling headfirst into the water was Iseult’s iron grip upon his collar. With the last arrowhead removed, she dug her heels into the gravel shore and towed him back. She wanted him to be upright so they could move away from the growing pool together.

Instead, Aeduan toppled backward. She barely caught him before he hit the earth and her knees buckled beneath his weight. Her

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bottom hit the rocks, pain barking through her seat bones. Her back hit a boulder, and her head cracked hard.

The spring wavered. Her eyes burned with sudden tears.

“Aeduan,” she said, but her rasping words earned no response. His magic had finally dragged him into a sleep. He would not wake up until he was healed.

Meaning Iseult was trapped beneath him, while her chest swelled with . . . with *something*. “You’re heavy,” she said, trying to move him. But she had no energy left. Not enough to move his blood-slickened dead weight. His head, peaceful and still, rested on her shoulder.

He was so warm against her, even as the cold morning caressed her skin. Then there it was again, that swelling in her lungs. Warm. Fizzy. Until at last it burst forth in a shrill laugh that felt a thousand miles away. It was someone else’s panicked amusement. Someone else’s weary body and fire-kissed mind. Someone else’s burgeoning headache and bloating scalp bruise.

Iseult was countless miles from her home, pinned to the rocks by a man who’d once been her enemy, while a wren chirruped from the waking forest nearby—and while a little Earthwitch and her mountain bat slept inside the hollow hill below.

*If only Saffi could see me now.*

Unable to fight it any longer, Iseult’s eyelids sank shut, and the world went quiet.

*Heat roars. Wood cracks and embers fly.*

*“Run.” Blood drips from his mother’s mouth as she speaks.*

*It splatters his face.*

*With arms stained to red, she pushes herself up. She wants him to crawl out from beneath her. She wants him to escape. “Run, my child, run.”*

*He does not run. He does not move. He waits, as he always does, for the flames to overtake him and the world to burn alive.*

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Aeduan had been in this nightmare before. Trapped and bleeding while flames crowded closer. Heat fanned against him, smoke scorched his lungs. But instead of the fiery tent he was used to seeing, instead of the storm he knew would come coursing in, he found only blue sky and wispy clouds. Instead of the clotted stench of his mother's blood, he smelled only the faint reek of his own.

The pain in his chest was the same, though. Agony that did not want him to move, that argued with his mother's last words. *Run, my child, run.*

Aeduan tried to turn, as he always did in the dream to no avail. Except this time, his head swiveled easily. The arrows and death that usually pinned him down were not stacked atop him. Instead, he realized with a jolt of confusion, *he* was pinning down another.

He gaped, his fire-flecked vision swimming and swaying. A head rested upon his shoulder, and he found he knew this face. He knew this profile—but what was the Threadwitch doing in his dream? It was as if she'd been holding him while he slept, and the oddness of that thought sent all his usual dream terror funneling away.

Orange flame and black smoke flickered, giving color to her ice-white skin. She was so close; he could see the ash gathering on her eyelashes and the frizz that heat and rain had lifted from her fine black hair. She had changed so much since he'd met her: the teardrop scar from the Poisonwitch acid by her left eye, the frayed, uneven edge to her hair from the fires of the Contested Lands.

Aeduan found himself unable to look away. How much more damage would he cause her? This Threadwitch who was not a Threadwitch at all?

*She should not be here*, he thought. If she stayed in his dream, then she would die like he did. Over and over until the rain came and Evrane with it.

He did not want her to die. In his dream or in real life. Unlike him, she was not a monster. She would not heal from the flames. She would not revive.

"Tseult," he tried to say, and to his surprise, the name actually

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tumbled from his tongue. Soft vowels. Hard consonants. A sound and taste that fit her so perfectly.

She stirred. Her hands, which were draped against Aeduan's sides, furling inward. Her fingers dug into his hipbones.

And at that touch, his stomach froze over. His lungs tightened with cold. Fire might consume them, but her touch was made of winter.

"Aeduan," she exhaled, and with that sigh, the flames around them shrank back. Then they shivered out completely, revealing a pond. A spring that Aeduan knew, surrounded by evergreens and boulders.

The ice inside him froze harder. No longer a comfort, but murderous in its intent.

This was no nightmare. Iseult truly held him; she truly breathed his name in sleep; they had truly been surrounded by flame.

*Too much.* It was too much for his pain-racked mind or body to handle, to comprehend. Iseult so near. Iseult's fingers still pressed into his hipbones. Iseult razing the earth to ash.

Against his most desperate, frantic desire—against every instinct that screamed at him to awaken fully—Aeduan's eyelids fell shut. A moan slipped over his tongue.

Then the darkness took hold, and the flames of his nightmare carried him away once more.

# THREE



This was why Adders wore black.

Safiya fon Hasstrel understood now. Black did not show blood the way the white floors did.

The ease and speed of it all stunned her the most. One moment, she had been staring at the nobleman's long, horse-like face, still attached to his body. The next moment, it was on the floor, bleeding, eyes blinking.

Vaness had invited the man to her throne room, as was proper when relatives visited. Cousin, second cousin, great-great-aunt's wife—they were all met in the imperial throne room. This man was a third cousin on Vaness's mother's side.

After kneeling before the Empress, his purple robe rustling with the movement, he'd been so bold as to plant a sandaled foot on the lowest step of the marble dais. Mere paces from where Safi stood, dressed in a perfect sleeveless white gown exactly like the Empress's.

He looked her up, he looked her down, obviously knowing exactly what Safi was. Vaness hadn't kept her Truthwitch secret.

Clearly, though, the man also did not *believe* in Safi's powers. His confident foot on the dais. The smile creasing through his jowled face, and even the unrushed nature of his bow, all belied skepticism.

Most people Safi had met in Azmir had been this way: so certain

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a Truthwitch was impossible. A story. A legend. Not a flesh-and-blood nineteen-year-old with the muscles and scars of a soldier.

Or perhaps the cousin had simply believed that, even if his lies were caught, the Empress of Marstok wouldn't actually hurt him. Family relations and all that.

"This is my cousin Bayrum of the Shards," Vaness said in that inflectionless, heavy way she had of speaking when at court. As if each word were carefully selected to not only express *precisely* what she intended, but also to convey how much thought she had put into the utterance.

Actually, now that Safi considered it, it wasn't only at court that Vaness spoke this way.

Vaness sat upon an iron stool. No cushion, no decorative additions. Very simple, really, for a woman with as many titles as she held—Empress of the Flame Children, Chosen Daughter of the Fire Well, the Most Worshipped of the Marstoks, the Destroyer of Kendura Pass, and likely several more that Safi had forgotten.

White adorned the throne room, as it did most of the palace, and the iron sconces upon the walls held neither candles nor Firewitch flame. The domed glass ceiling overhead, crafted by Azmir's famed Glasswitches, filled the room with more than enough morning light to see by.

A single wave of Vaness's hand, and every iron fixture could shoot off the wall, molding into whatever shape the Empress might need.

Not that Vaness would need to defend herself with her Adders nearby. Twelve of them flanked the dais at all times, clad in black so dark it seemed to suck in the sunlight. Gloves, headscarves, and soft, silent boots—the only skin Adders ever showed was the narrowest streak of their eyes.

The black sentries were never far from their Empress, and these days, never far from Safi either. One in particular, named Rokesh, had been appointed the lead guard for Safi. He followed her everywhere, though to protect her or to keep her in line, Safi wasn't entirely sure. She had taken to calling him Nursemaid, and surprisingly, he chuckled every time.

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Safi had been exceptionally well behaved since arriving in Azmir two weeks ago. She went where she was told to go; she listened when she was told to listen; she searched for lies when she was told to search for lies. And when noblemen eyed her up and down as openly as Bayrum of the Shards was doing, then she offered a polite curtsy in return—even though she *wanted* to break their arms.

Habim would be very impressed by her self-control.

“How do you do?” she asked.

The man only waved her greeting aside before swiveling toward Vaness and launching into a long-winded description of his travels. How he had crossed the Sea of Karadin in a storm, how flame hawks now nested on the mainland shores, how bandits lay in wait amidst the cotton farms beside the river.

As the man continued to list off the trials of his journey, each one more impressive than the last, Safi stared him down. Bayrum of the Shards was a liar—that much was obvious. His love for subterfuge and deception frizzled down her spine, scratching at her insides in a way that only an untrustworthy soul could.

Safi would have expected no less from a nobleman, though. At court, everyone lied. It did not matter what nation, what government, what people. Uncle Eron had once told her that when power was at play, lies grew thick as weeds and the liars beneath them flourished.

It had proved true in Cartorra, in Dalmotti, and now again in Marstok. Like weeds, though, lies were not a symptom of corruption in the soul, and truth was not a symptom of its purity. Nations could not run without blackmail or false promises or money exchanging hands, especially not nations as vast as the Marstoki Empire.

What Safi needed to know, though, was if this cousin was a part of the plot to overthrow Empress Vaness. It wasn't a plot that Safi believed existed. Yes, there had been explosions and attacks across the city. And yes, there was a current of . . . of *wrong* and of *rot* shivering through Azmir, but that was connected to the Baedyed Pirates' rebellion. Safi was certain of it. After all, those pirates had made their betrayal known in Saldonica, and they had already tried to kill Vaness once.

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Vaness remained unconvinced, however, for one simple reason: the recent attacks had not included cries of *For the Sand Sea! For the Sand Sea!* This, she insisted, was the way of the Baedyeds. This, she insisted, was why another plot must be at work.

Now Safi was forced to meet every Sultanate minister, every military officer, and every backwoods imperial relation in Marstok, not to mention the massive gathering of basically *everyone* in the empire who had come to the city for the Empress's birthday celebration tomorrow.

It had been almost fun at first. A novelty. New faces, a chance to put all her training to the test while she sieved out the pure from the wicked. The first day, she had taken her duties very seriously, listening with great care to anyone who crossed the Empress's path. But soon, all the words, all the truths and the lies, had blended into an endless cascade of meaningless nothing.

By the second day, Safi focused less. By the fifth, she had stopped listening at all. The words mattered little. If there was rot within this court, she would have to spot it another way. Her solution became three questions—very simple questions that eliminated any chance for an adept liar or devout believer to somehow trick her magic. For the reality was that Safi's witchery was easily confused. Her power tricked by strong faith. Her magic duped by rumors or ancient mistruths.

When Bayrum of the Shards finally paused for a breath between tales of a daring escape from raiders, Safi pounced. "Are you aware of the peace treaty with the Baedyeds?"

The reaction was immediate, although to the man's credit, he showed no panic on his face. No muscle twitched, no eyelid fluttered. "Yes. I heard Her Imperial Majesty was negotiating such an accord."

*True*, Safi's magic hummed. It caught her by surprise. Many knew of the treaty, but they usually lied about it. No one wanted to admit to partaking in gossip.

"And," she continued, "have you heard of a plot to overthrow the Empress and claim the throne?"

"Nothing specific." A dismissive shrug. "But such rumors always abound. Wherever there is power, flies will clot." He smiled at Vaness, and though the expression rang false, his words rang true.

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“And,” Safi asked lastly, each word carefully spaced, “did you know of the explosion on the Empress’s ship—”

“Everyone knows of it!”

“—before the attack occurred?” Safi had to pitch her voice louder to be heard, but the effect was instantaneous.

A pause, a blink. Then a slow “Of course not. What a ridiculous question.”

The lie dragged down Safi’s neck. Scratched over her skull like fingernails. The nobleman had indeed known, and such a thing was only possible if he had been involved in the plot.

A vast pit opened in Safi’s gut. Her toes tapped a descant against the tiles. Here was a man responsible for almost killing her two weeks ago. She and Vaness had survived; the Adders and crew had not been so lucky.

Safi glanced at the Empress of Marstok. Vaness had already rooted her dark eyes on Safi’s face. She arched a single eyebrow, seemingly disinterested in whatever word might fall from Safi’s tongue.

Yet just as Safi could feel the cousin’s lies, she could spot Vaness’s too. The Empress was the coiled asp, waiting for an answer and ready to act.

Safi bowed her head. “False. He knew of the attack.”

A snap from Vaness’s fingers. A cry from the cousin. Then the man’s hands were rising, his sleeves falling back to expose pale wrists and forearms.

In a blur of gray speed, iron shot from the shackles at Vaness’s wrists, wound into a disc, and sliced through the man’s neck.

His head hit the tiles. His body slumped next, blood spurting and oozing and gathering in the grout. Great pools of red that spidered and spread.

*What poor servant will have to clean this?* Safi wondered vaguely—also wondering why there was still no sound coming from her throat. Or why she was so calmly smoothing at her white dress. Or why she was fixating on the three spots on her hem, already drying to brown.

Somehow she kept her legs from rubbering out beneath her.

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Somehow she managed to speak to Rokesh when he cut into her path as she stepped off the dais a few moments later and aimed for the door.

"I'm ill," Safi told him. Her voice sounded so very far away. Her breakfast, however, felt very near and rising fast.

"She may go," Vaness said curtly from behind.

At a clap from Rokesh, seven more Adders marched into a square formation around Safi. If she extended her arms, she'd brush their black shoulders. They aimed for the door, clearly knowing Safi intended to get away from this place. Away from that body.

For some reason, the unlucky servant tasked with getting the blood off the white floor was all that fed through Safi's mind, though. She didn't want to add to the mess by stepping through the red. She didn't want metallic, sticky blood on her white slippers, and she didn't want to track prints across the marble tiles or into the sandstone halls.

Around would be easier. *Around, around, around.*

But she couldn't go around. Not with the Adders beside her. They stepped through the blood, and she had to step with them. It splashed and spread, and Safi tracked it out the other side.

At the wide throne room doors, Safi pushed into a jog. The Adders did too. Down the seven endless sandstone hallways they ran, aiming for the Empress's personal living wing. Safi had sprawling quarters of her own next to Vaness's. Next to a private library too, which no one but the Empress and now Safi were allowed to use. So aside from the ever-present Adders stationed at every door, Safi had a sliver of privacy in her room.

Privacy for vomiting alone.

She almost made it too. Thirty paces from the ornately carved oak door, Safi's sickness reached a head. There were few decorations in the halls, only the occasional lemon trees, sconces, and dangling iron wind chimes. Nowhere for assassins to hide. Nowhere for a sick young woman to hurl up her breakfast.

Safi had no choice but to skid to a halt and double over in the hall. Acid and bile spewed out, chunky where the chancellor's blood had been liquid. Erratic where the blood had slithered so smooth.

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*More mess for the servants.*

As she retched, the Adders stayed firmly planted in their square around Safi. Even when bits of bile splattered on Rokesh's boots, none of them reacted. Nor made any move to help. A reminder that they were soldiers. That Rokesh was *not* a nursemaid, and he was most certainly not a friend.

Well, Safi was as disgusted with herself as the Adders no doubt were. She had killed someone. That man's life—that man's *death*—were on her now. And though she had seen death before, grim, violent, bloody, she had never been the cause of it.

Safi wiped her mouth with the collar of her dress and hauled herself upright. The world swayed, and she briefly wished at least one of the Adders would meet her gaze. Then Rokesh finally did.

"This isn't what I wanted," she told him, even though she knew he did not care. Still, she felt the need to make him understand. So she repeated, louder and with a throat burned raw, "This isn't what I wanted."

Then Safi stumbled the rest of the way to her room, blood and sickness trailing behind.

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## FOUR



Beside a towering waterfall, Merik Nihar picked his way up a cliffside. Spindrift misted his sun-soaked face.

“Another hour,” Ryber had said at the bottom of the cliff. “Then we’ll reach the Sightwitch Sister Convent, and I’ll guide you through the glamour that protects it.”

Always, Ryber had guided Merik and Cam, steady and true. Since leaving Lovats two weeks ago, she had led them through the Sirmayans, ever closer to her childhood home—the long-lost Sightwitch Sister Convent, a place Merik hadn’t known existed. And he certainly hadn’t known that Ryber was a Sister from their ranks.

Water caressed Merik’s face. He was tired, he was parched—so parched, he’d already imagined dumping his face into the waterfall and gulping whatever he could before it dragged him down.

He glanced at Cam behind him. Then glanced again.

“I’m fine, sir,” the boy grouched. He had to shout to be heard above the falls. “Stop looking at me like that.”

“I’ll stop looking,” Merik countered, “when your hand is fully healed.” He knew Cam was sick of the fretting. *Overprotective hen* was his phrase, but Cam also couldn’t see how pale his brown, dappled skin had become since leaving Lovats. Since the Nines had cut off his pinkie.

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“At the top,” Merik called, “let’s stop and change the bandages.”

“Fine, fine, sir. If you ins—”

A great rip tore through the earth, stealing Cam’s words and tossing Merik against the cliff face.

It tossed Cam right off.

Without thought, Merik’s magic snapped free. A whip of winds to snatch the boy before he hit the rapids. A coil of air to launch him straight into Merik’s arms.

Then he clutched the boy close while aftershocks rumbled through the stone. While they panted and heaved and hung on. It felt an eternity before the quake fully faded, leaving dust and water thick in the air.

“Sir,” Cam breathed against him, eyes bulging and terrified. “You used your magic.”

“I know,” he said at the same time Ryber coughed out, “Everyone all right?” Her umber black skin was streaked with dust from the tremor as she clung to the ledge above.

“Hye,” Merik called, even though that might not be true. Two weeks, he had stayed so diligent against his witchery’s call. Against the Nihar rage too, for they were connected. He could not stop his winds when the anger took hold.

And he could not stop Kullen when the winds awoke.

“Just a bit farther,” Ryber said. She scrabbled down slightly and grabbed hold of Cam’s good hand. Then, with Merik to push, they got Cam onto a higher ledge.

“Maybe,” Cam called as he climbed, “the first mate didn’t notice the magic.”

*Not the first mate*, Merik thought, wishing yet again that Cam would stop calling Kullen that. The first mate was gone. Kullen was gone. He had cleaved in Lejna. His magic had reached a breaking point, then it had burned through him and turned him into a monster. Yet unlike other Cleaved, who died in minutes from the boil of corrupted power, Kullen had stayed alive.

And somehow, Kullen’s mind had been replaced by a shadow beast that called himself the Fury.

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Merik was just about to resume his own ascent when a voice split his skull: *THERE YOU ARE.*

Merik clutched at his head.

*I AM COMING.*

“Sir?” Cam blinked down at him. “Is it the first mate?”

“Hye,” he gritted out. “*Move.*”

This time, Merik did not resist his magic. Kullen had found them; they were already damned. He drew in his breath, clogged as it was with dust off the mountain, and let the hot air spiral close. Fragile strands, but enough to push them faster. Enough to send him, Cam, and Ryber skipping straight up to the top of the cliff.

When at last they reached the final ledge, they scabbled to their feet and ran. No one looked back. They could hear the storm approaching, sense the cold on its way.

Fast, impossibly fast with all that dark, wretched power coursing through it. A journey that had taken days for Merik, Cam, and Ryber would take mere minutes for the Fury to complete.

They ran faster. Or they tried to, but waves of dizziness crushed against Merik—and Cam, judging by the boy’s yelps of alarm.

“Ignore it,” Ryber commanded. “It’s part of the glamour’s magic. You just have to trust me and keep going.” She took hold of Cam’s forearm, and Cam took hold of Merik’s. They ran on.

They reached a forest. Trunks striped past, prison bars to hold them in and nowhere to go but forward. Green needles bled into red bark and melted into hard earth. Everything spun and swung.

Ryber never slowed, though, so Merik and Cam never slowed either.

Then the creatures of the forest began to flee. Spiders rained down and tangled in Merik’s short hair. Then came the moths—a great cloud racing not toward the sky but simply ahead. Away from the Fury.

*I never thought you would leave Nubrevna, the Fury crooned in Merik’s mind. All this time, I thought you would return to the Nihar lands. After all, do you not care about your own people?*

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Birds launched past Merik. Mice and rats and squirrels too.

“Faster,” Merik urged, summoning more winds. Cold winds. The world might be unstable, but if he had to, he would fight.

“We’re almost there!” Ryber shouted from the fore, while beneath their pounding feet, the earth quaked yet again. Merik couldn’t help but imagine each lurch as one of Kullen’s steps booming ever closer.

“Where are we even going?” Cam panted. “If he can follow us through the glamour—”

“He can’t.”

“He already did.” As Merik uttered those words, he slowed to a stop and looked back. Black snaked across the forest floor. So fast, there was no outrunning it. So fast that before he had even turned forward once more, the darkness swept across him.

He still had hold of Cam, and Cam still had hold of Ryber.

They kept running.

Soon, no sunlight penetrated. The darkness moved and shifted around them and Merik had never known there could be so many shades of gray. Then hoarfrost raced across the forest, a crackling that froze creatures as they fled.

*Where are you, Merik? Where has my Heart-Thread taken you?*

Merik couldn’t answer, even if he wanted to. The dregs of the glamour’s magic fought to disorient him . . .

Until he saw it: a haze of gray stone amidst the shadows. Hewn from the mountain itself, a chapel coalesced before them, its high doorway blocked by saplings and sedge.

Ryber slowed, releasing Cam and grabbing for the knife at her hip. There was no time to hack through the brush, though, so Merik thrust his winds straight at the overgrowth. Raging air ripped the plants up by the roots.

A dark doorway yawned before them.

In moments, they were inside, and what little light they’d had vanished entirely. The chaos followed, though. As did the bellowing of winds, charging ever faster their way.

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“*Ignite!*” Ryber shouted, and a weak torch lit among the endless shadows.

Merik and Cam skidded to a stop. “Keep your hand elevated, Cam!” He didn’t know why holding Cam’s bloodied hand aloft seemed the most important thing when death chased from behind.

Ahead, Ryber’s hands slammed against a stone wall. “Why is this here?” she screamed. “Why are you closed to me? I am Ryber Fortiza, the last Sightwitch Sister—*why have you closed to me?*” She smacked her hands harder against the granite. “I’ve only been gone a year! Open up! You *must* open up!”

Nothing happened, and she jerked back toward Cam and Merik. “This shouldn’t be closed. I’ve *never* seen it closed!” Her hands clutched at her heart, at her face. Then back to her heart again. “It must be because he follows—” She broke off as the hoarfrost slithered into the chapel’s space.

The pale lantern light guttered out.

The Fury had arrived.

Merik shoved Cam behind him. “Stay with Ryber,” he ordered, and to his vast relief, the boy actually obeyed. Then Merik stepped back through the door and advanced on the shadows.

“Let them go!” His voice sounded stretched, as if cold had sapped it of all dimension. “It’s me you want, isn’t it?”

“No.” The word whispered against Merik’s face, plucking at his skin. Then the Fury stepped from the shadows. A thousand dark ripples moved around him; the evergreens crashed and waved. Somehow, though, Kullen looked as he always had. Tall, pale haired, paler skinned. Only his eyes had changed: black with small lines radiating along the temples.

Black lines like Merik wore across his chest. The foul taint of the Cleaved.

A bolt of pity cut through Merik. Ryber loved Kullen as much as Merik did. But unlike Merik, she had not yet seen this monster Kullen had become, and he hoped she would never have to. He hoped she would not turn back this way.

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As if following Merik's thoughts, Kullen smiled—a taut, inhuman thing that stretched at his lips but did not reach his eyes. “I know my Heart-Thread is with you.” He sang the words, and his steps bounced closer, almost jaunty. “And is that also young Leeri I see following?” The smile spread wider. “He always was so loyal. But *no one* is as loyal as I am, Merik.”

Wind burst out, a wall to knock Merik back. He hit the ground. Pain tore through him and Kullen laughed and stalked closer.

But Merik drew in the Fury's own winds, enough to attack, enough to distract. Then he charged upright, and as he flew, he swung out a leg and aimed for his Threadbrother's knees.

Kullen was already skipping back by the time he reached him, but it was enough. They had moved away from the door, and Merik had—for a flicker of a moment—gained the advantage. He unsheathed his cutlass; he swung. No magic, just brute force. It was the one thing he had always done better than Kullen: swordplay. And though Kullen tried to sweep at Merik with magic, his attempts were dull. Halfhearted.

For of course, they were bound by cleaving magic and Threads. If Merik died, then Kullen died with him. And while Merik might not understand how, there was no denying that truth he had faced in Lovats two weeks before.

He was faced with it again now as Kullen skipped and slid, avoiding Merik's blade yet scarcely fighting back. “You won't kill me,” Kullen declared, spinning left.

“I will.” Merik darted, his blade aimed for Kullen's neck. “I would gladly die if it meant saving the people you've abandoned.”

“Always so brave, our Prince Merik. Always so *holy*. But remember: the holiest have the farthest to fall.”

“*SIR!*” Cam shrieked, tinny and distant. “The door!”

Kullen heard those words too. As one, he and Merik turned. As one, they flew for the chapel. It was no different from the hundreds of races they'd held as children in Nihar, and just like in those days, Kullen was faster. Yet Merik had meant what he'd said: he would die to protect Cam and Ryber.

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As the chapel zoomed in close, Merik swung one last time at Kullen. He missed Kullen's neck, but not Kullen's ear. The top sliced off. Kullen screamed, a sound that exploded in Merik's brain. Mental fists that punched away all thought, all consciousness.

The shadows roared over Merik. He fell.

Merik awoke in the middle of a storm.

He tried to stand—wriggling left and right, straining to rise as dark rain flayed his skin. *I'm bound*, he realized at the same instant that lightning pierced the skies. Thunder crashed, against his skin and inside his skull.

Merik rolled left. Mud slid over his cheek. Grass swept and writhed around him, and rainwater pooled. If he did not at least sit up, the water would rise. He would drown.

That wasn't what frightened him most, though. No, *that* was Kullen's voice cracking through the storm, buzzing in Merik's brain.

*Just in time, Threadbrother. You will get to see exactly what I came here for.*

Digging his shoulder into the sodden soil, Merik drew in his knees. His wrists were tied behind his back, and his ankles looped tight. But with several grunts, groans, and popped joints, he managed to get his legs beneath him. He managed to sit up.

A meadow surrounded him, broken up by eight massive stones in three rows. Crudely-shaped columns, they towered twice as high as a man, twice as wide, and over the nearest one, Kullen flew. Lightning sizzled into him, winds spun and flew.

*A thousand years, these have stood. A thousand years, the Sightwitches have hidden their treasures from the world. But no longer. Once this glamour falls, I will lead the Raider King's forces to this place. Electricity ruptured outward, blinding in its brightness. And we will claim the sleeping mountain.*

Just before Merik's eyes seared shut, unable to fight the heat or the light or the noise, he saw the magicked lightning hit one of the stones.

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It fractured, a sound that ripped across the sky, ripped into Merik's exposed skin.

A *boom* of energy tore through the earth. It dragged Merik down, back into the mud, where rain hammered against him and shadows took hold once more.

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# FIVE



Today was the day.

Two weeks of preparation, of cleaning and assembling, of organizing and arranging and pestering the High Council for help, donations, people—*anything* really, the stingy bastards—and now the underground city was finally ready for refugees.

Vivia Nihar, however, Queen-in-Waiting to the Nubrevnan throne, was not ready at all.

Her heart seemed to have gotten stuck somewhere behind her esophagus, and she had rubbed so much at her left coat cuff that she'd actually snapped off the gold button.

Whoever found it would be very happy, indeed.

Vivia stood before the Pin's Keep main entrance, crowds thick before her. Squalling babes and frantic fathers; lone, lost teenagers; and coughing grandmothers, too. But none were the faces Vivia wanted—the two faces she'd expected to see when the chimes had rung in the ninth hour.

*Come on, Stix, come on.* This wasn't like her. Stacia Sotar, Vivia's former first mate—now elevated to full captain—was always on time, always *early*. Yet nowhere in the thicket of hungry faces did Vivia spot Stix's white hair, so bright against her black skin.

Nor did she spot the man Stix and five other guards were meant

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to escort: her father, Serafin Nihar, former King and former King Regent.

“You’re *sure* they aren’t inside?” Vivia asked her own nearest guard for the fourth time since the chimes had clanged. And for the fourth time, the woman shook her head. “There’s no one inside Pin’s Keep, Highness. As ordered.”

The shelter had been completely cleared out. All its volunteers now waited in the cellar where the tunnel to the under-city began, or else they waited in the under-city itself. Fifty soldiers also stood sentry, while another two hundred were dispersed throughout Lovats, as insisted upon by Vizers Quihar and Eltar. *Riots are a possibility*, they kept chorsing, and loath as Vivia was to admit that they were right . . .

Well, they were right. Vivia’s lottery system might have worked thus far without protest, but once families saw others being escorted into a new, underground home, such reactions might shift like a fickle tide.

And Vivia could hardly blame them. Lovats had been in shambles since the seafire attack two weeks ago, and it had hardly been pristine or whole before that. Which was why Vivia had had her Pin’s Keep volunteers spend a week telling any and every person they met that this lottery system was *Only step one in a much larger, longer-term plan to house the city!*

Admittedly, Vivia had yet to sort out the rest of her plan, and the sudden ending of the Twenty Year Truce—as well as the resuming war that the Truce had paused—now kept the High Council too distracted to help her. Once her coronation *finally* came, though, and once she *finally* wore the crown that was hers by birth, then she could take matters into her own hands. She wouldn’t need the approval of a bunch of men who never agreed on anything.

Vivia cleared her throat. She couldn’t wait any longer; Stix and her father would just have to miss the opening. She gave a final swipe against her shirt front. Then patted the edges of her face. A movement she had done so often as a child, and had *thought* she’d grown out of as an adult.

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Until two weeks ago, when they'd named her Queen-in-Waiting. *When you are with others*, her mother always used to say, *the Little Fox must become a bear. Now, is your mask on, Vivia?*

Yes, Mother, Vivia thought. *It's on.* Her lips parted, and the crowds nearest her quieted—

Then there they were. Stix at the fore, shoving through the fray and half a head taller than the rest. Behind her, surrounded by soldiers in the same navy uniforms Stix wore, marched Serafin.

And Vivia realized the people hadn't quieted for her at all. They recognized the former King; they gawped and whispered and waved. Serafin waved back, grinning. His cheeks bore more color than Vivia had seen him wear in almost a year.

She should be happy about that. And she was—she really was. Yet there was something else knotting in her belly. Something she didn't like that she wished would stop immediately. And it did stop the instant her eyes met Stix's. The instant Stix smiled, dazzling and bright.

Heat fanned up Vivia's neck onto her face, an inescapable blush that happened every time she saw her best friend, and likely would continue until Vivia finally worked up the courage to mention the kiss from the under-city.

Nothing had been the same since that kiss—a mere brush of Stix's lips on Vivia's cheek. And nothing had been the same since Vivia had been labeled Queen-in-Waiting . . . yet not truly labeled at all, because although the power might have passed from her father to her, the "waiting" part seemed more important to the High Council than the "queen" part.

"So sorry, Your Highness," Stix murmured, hurrying into position on Vivia's left side. "A message came in that needed immediate processing. *But,*" she added, glancing at Serafin, "I wasn't sure he should see it."

"What could be—"

Stix waved her off. "We can deal with it after this."

Right. *This.* The unveiling of Vivia's under-city. The reason all these hundreds of families had lined up, and these thousands of people had piled into the Skulks to ogle her.

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And the reason Vivia's guts had punched holes through her other organs.

"Vivia," her father declared, a bass boom that could silence an entire city—and did. It was good to hear him so strong after months of fragile whispers. It was, it *was*. "Shall we begin?" Serafin moved to Vivia's other side.

"Hye," she breathed, and hastily, she tapped once more at the edges of her face. *Yes, Mother, it's on.* Then she sucked in her breath, matched her father's fierce expression, and—

*"The empires,"* Serafin bellowed, *"have resumed the war."*

Vivia's teeth clacked shut.

*"We did not ask for this, and we never have."*

Her father was speaking. Why was he speaking?

*"Always, they try to cow us and displace us. Always they try to crush us beneath their boot heels, and always, Nubrevna has stood strong."*

What was her father doing? This was supposed to be her speech. Vivia had spent three days writing it.

*"This city and its people have stood for centuries."* He opened his arms wide, body hale and voice relentless. *"And we will stand for centuries more. Today marks a new era for us. A new beginning that we will not let the empires steal away."*

He pumped a fist to the sky, and the crowds broke loose like a thunderstorm. Noise slammed against Vivia, charged and alive.

*"Today,"* he went on, somehow pitching his voice even louder, *"we open the Lovats under-city and begin moving families into its homes—we begin moving you. We have worked hard for two weeks to prepare this space. We have worked hard for you."*

More stamping, more screaming, and Vivia *knew* she should be stamping and screaming too. Not just because the under-city was ready, but because this was the Serafin she remembered. This was the force she had grown up with, the ruler she'd tried to be.

But she was too stunned to do anything. He was saying *her* speech before the people *she* had worked to house. Hye, he had always told her, *Share the glory, share the blame.* But this . . . this felt bigger than that.

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A hand gripped Vivia's forearm. She stiffened, knowing Stix meant only to comfort her. Or maybe her friend meant it as a sign of solidarity—a sign that someone else in this rapturous mayhem knew Serafin was claiming glory he hadn't earned.

As he trumpeted on, reciting words *Vivia* had written and words *Vivia* had practiced in the mirror, she found her shoulders rising toward her ears. Found her fingers curling into aching, throbbing fists at her sides.

*One should not need credit, Jana always used to say, so long as the job gets done.* And the job was getting done. It was getting done well—*Vivia* had seen to that. And her father looked healthier than he had in ages. She should be happy. She *should* be happy.

"And today," her father finished, "*we prove to ourselves and to the empires that though we cannot always see the blessing in the loss . . .*"

"*Strength is the gift of our Lady Baile,*" finished the people, a refrain to shake the city's ancient stones, "*and she will never abandon us.*"

"Vivia?" Serafin turned to his daughter, beaming and victorious. "Open the doors."

And Vivia's throat closed up. Tears seared along the backs of her eyeballs, for of course, those were supposed to be her words. She was supposed to turn to Stix and say them. *Captain? Open the doors.*

Instead, her father had said them. Instead, the Queen-in-Waiting was the one turning toward the entrance. And instead, the Queen-in-Waiting, who had failed thoroughly to be a bear or a Nihar or anything impressive at all, was the one laying gloved hands upon an iron latch while her father basked in the city's love.

Behind Vivia, the entire city of Lovats quaked with joy, with excitement, with anticipation—and all of it was focused on Serafin Nihar. A man who had never even set foot in the under-city.

Vivia shoved open the entrance doors. A groan of hinges and wood that the crowds' din swallowed whole. Then she stepped inside, and thanked Noden that the hallway was empty.

Because this way, no one could see her cry.

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\* \* \*

Vivia led the way into the under-city. The family behind her, a mother and two sons, uttered not a word the entire way through Pin's Keep, nor into the cellar, nor down the tunnel leading underground. Torches flickered, smokeless and Firewitched. An expense Vivia had insisted on in a space where smoke could be deadly.

She wished the family would speak. Somehow, the silence was worse than the crowd's cacophony outside.

This morning, when Vivia had imagined this moment, triumph had foamed in her chest. She'd felt so full with happiness and pride that she'd wanted to laugh into her breakfast. She *had* laughed into her breakfast.

Now, her chest felt bludgeoned. Over and over, a staccato explosion that made her lungs billow double-time. That crushed her ribs in a vise and made her heart feel so heavy, so flattened it was hard to breathe.

She wanted to break something. She wanted to scream. She wanted to curl in a ball and cry. But this wasn't rage. This wasn't grief. It was something skittery and aflame. Something shameful and unforgiving.

*One should not need credit*, she shouted inwardly. *One should not need credit!* She wasn't even fully Queen, yet already she was a terrible one, exactly what her mother had trained her *not* to be.

And an unfaithful daughter too.

It didn't help that her left shoulder ached. The gash from a raider blade two weeks ago had healed well thanks to salves and tonics. Time in the underground lake had helped too, but the wound wasn't fully gone yet.

When at last Vivia reached the tunnel's end, six faces framed a doorway hewn from the limestone: the Hagfishes, smoothed away by time and foxfire.

Two weeks ago, Vivia had come here with Stix. For the first time, she had pushed this door wide and discovered the forgotten under-city—just as her mother had always described it would be. Now, when Vivia shoved back the limestone, light rumbled over her. Laughter too, from her volunteers and soldiers.

She wished it would all go away.

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“Welcome,” Vivia wheezed without glancing at the family. She needed to leave here. She needed to go somewhere alone and face this bludgeoning in private.

The mother crept into the under-city first, eyes as wide as her two boys’. “Thank you, Your Majesty,” she said, hesitant but real.

“Not *Your Majesty*,” Vivia gruffed out. “Just *Your Highness*.” Instantly she wished she hadn’t said that. Rude, rude, rude—she *knew* she was being rude, yet rather than apologize or simply say *You’re welcome*, like a normal human would do, Vivia kept staring into the middle distance.

Then Varrmin—thank the Hagfishes—appeared. He worked in the Pin’s Keep kitchens, jovial, warm, and all the things Vivia had never been. The instant he was near enough for Vivia to see the gray scruff in his beard, she spun on her heel and fled.

There was another exit from the under-city that fed into the Cisterns, and she aimed for that. She wanted to feel the Tidewitched waters of those tunnels—and she wanted to reach them before any guards could form rank around her.

She wasn’t fast enough to evade Stix, though. Vivia didn’t know where the woman came from, but suddenly she was there, falling into step beside Vivia, her long legs easily keeping Vivia’s frantic pace.

“How is it,” Stix asked, “that men always seem to claim victory over the triumphs earned by women?”

Vivia didn’t answer that question. She hadn’t answered it two months before, either, when Merik had been appointed Admiral with absolutely no qualifications to recommend him except his gender.

Instead, Vivia stomped faster. The empty, lantern-lit houses she had worked so hard to clean now glowered down at her.

“I’m sorry he did that,” Stix went on. “I know you wrote that speech.”

“One should not need credit,” Vivia murmured, “as long as it gets the job done.”

“Wait.” Stix reached for her. “Your Highness.”

*Your Highness*. No more calling her *Sir* or *Vivia*. For two weeks, it had been this way, and Vivia didn’t know if it was because of the

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kiss or her new title. Either way, she hated it. She wanted the old Stix back.

“Please,” Vivia said at last, wishing her voice wasn’t so shrill. “Please, just call me ‘Viv.’”

No reaction. Instead, Stix offered a rolled-up missive stamped with the Royal Voicewitch seal. “This came for you, but I didn’t think . . . That is to say, I thought you should see it before your father did.”

Vivia knew she ought to reprimand Stix for hiding this from Serafin. He might not be King or King Regent, but he was still Vivia’s first and foremost adviser. She said nothing, though, because for the first time since leaving the crowds outside Pin’s Keep, Vivia’s heart felt a bit less flattened. Her lungs felt a bit less crushed.

She slowed at an intersection and unfurled the message. Foxfire flared brighter than lamps here, casting the paper in green.

It was from the Empress of Marstok.

*Now that true negotiations for trade have begun, I wish to invite you to Azmir. Some decisions are best made face-to-face. As are some apologies, particularly for the treaty terms my ambassadors attempted to make before my return.*

*I have alerted all soldiers to allow Nubrevnan Wind transport into the city, should you decide to come. All I ask is for several hours’ advance warning.*

Vivia blinked. Then read the message again, a new sensation winding through her muscles and lungs. A hot, tightening sensation that was a thousand times preferable to the frenzied panic from before.

On the third read-through, a laugh choked up from her belly. For surely the Empress could not be serious. “Tell Her Majesty,” Vivia said at last, crumpling the missive and shoving it into Stix’s waiting hands, “that she can come to me if she really wants to negotiate. And that all I ask is for ‘several hours’ advance warning.’”

Stix chuckled at that, but it was a taut, nervous sound. And when Vivia launched back into a march, she followed more sedately behind.

“Who the hell-waters does she think she is?” Vivia demanded.

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“Well,” Stix said, “she *probably* thinks she’s the Empress of the Flame Children, Chosen Daughter of the Fire Well, the Most Worshipped of the Marstoks, Destroyer of Kendura Pass—”

“And?”

“And she’s used to people doing her bidding.”

Vivia scoffed. “I could have just as many titles too, if I wanted them.”

“Of course you could, Your Highness.”

*Your Highness.* There it was again, and just like that, it was too much. Vivia didn’t need Stix’s pity; she didn’t need Stix’s condescension. And above all, she didn’t need credit or titles or the adoration of a city she worked so hard for.

She didn’t, she *didn’t*.

They were almost to the exit now. The wooden barricade built to keep unsuspecting refugees out of the dangerous tunnels glimmered in the green light, and the waters of the Cisterns rumbled in Vivia’s chest. They called to her magic as they barreled past, uneven and weak since the attack two weeks ago.

Before Vivia could tow out the key that would allow her through the barricade, Stix pushed in front of her. “Wait. Please,” she began. “Just hear me out, Your Highness.”

“Why?” Rude, rude—there she went again, being rude. “What is it you need to say?”

“I think you should go to Azmir.”

It was not what Vivia expected, and it was also not what Vivia wanted.

But Stix wasn’t finished. “Believe it or not, the city will not collapse if you’re gone for a day, and the chance to trade with Marstok . . . Can we really risk passing that up?”

“I don’t have time,” Vivia snapped. She pulled out the key. “Please move aside, Captain.”

Stix didn’t move. She just folded her arms across her chest, a pose Vivia had seen her make a thousand times, usually relaxed and smiling while her nearsighted eyes squinted.

Now, there was no smile. Now, Stix’s lips were pinched tight. “Why

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don't you have time? The operation with the under-city is complete, and you have soldiers across the city to see that it runs smoothly. The High Council doesn't meet until tomorrow, and you have *me* to make sure the dam repairs proceed as planned. If anything, today is the perfect day for you to go."

"But my father," Vivia began.

"Has nothing to do with you. He stole your speech. He stole the applause and recognition that should have been yours. *You* are Queen-in-Waiting. Not him. And how many times have we said that Noden and the Hagfishes ought to bend to a woman's rule?"

"Please," Stix added, straightening off the barricade. "The Hasstrels only sent us that one shipment of grains, and now they aren't answering our Voicewitches. We *need* this. So do it for you, and do it for Nubrevna. You might not have all the titles the Empress has, but that doesn't make you any less than her. And *you* are Queen-in-Waiting, Viv. Not your father."

Ah. *Viv*. The one thing Vivia had wanted her best friend to say for the last two weeks, and now it was offered alongside a plea.

The bludgeoning returned, twice as strong. Twice as vicious. Vivia had to get away before her chest burst. She *had* to be alone.


"I'll consider it," she said, stunned when the words sounded crisp and normal. Then she pushed past Stix, unlocked the barricade, and hurried into the tunnels beyond as fast as her bungling feet would carry her.

And when the Cistern's tides barreled toward her, she did not try to stop them. She did not use her magic to take control or ease their impact. Instead, she let the waters of her city drag her down and carry her far away.

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# SIX



Stacia Sotar ran her fingers over the carvings in the limestone. Her skin glowed green beneath the foxfire. A hundred tiny boxes, each with diagonal lines to intersect, framed a rectangle as tall as she. It was as if someone had intended to build a door here, had even begun the process, and then abandoned it before actually hollowing out a passage.

*Or maybe the door only travels one way.*

For some reason, Stix kept thinking that this morning. That maybe, somehow, by some magic she did not understand, there was indeed a doorway here.

*A doorway that only traveled one way.*

Stix's hand fell away from the carvings. She eased back two steps, head shaking as it did every time she'd come here. The urge to talk to Vivia swelled in her chest. She wanted to ask Vivia what she thought this door might be, tucked off the edge of the under-city, and above all, she wanted to know if Vivia heard the voices that trickled out from the stone.

The truth was, though, that Stix would never . . . she *could* never speak of this to Vivia. The Queen-in-Waiting had enough burdens as it was—too many, actually, and Stix refused to add to that heap.

It didn't help that things had been stretched so thin between her

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and Vivia since the kiss they never spoke of. It was so odd—had always been so odd—that Stix could be so near to her best friend, yet somehow a thousand leagues away. She caught glimpses of the real Vivia from time to time, but that was all she ever got. Tiny peeks that never seemed to last.

After the kiss, Stix thought she'd finally earned that raw honesty. That she'd earned Vivia's true face she so adored. But then the promise of the crown had been laid atop Vivia's head, and with it, a thousand tasks needed to rebuild a city scarred. Vivia had retreated behind her masks and her duties.

Leaving Stix to face the whispers all alone.

Besides, what could Stix even say? *I know the underground city too well, Viv. I find secret corners and hidden streets that I should not be able to find.*

*Or, I feel anxious every moment I'm away from the city. But as soon as I'm back inside its walls, I feel as if I can breathe again.*

Or, the one that scared Stix the most, the one she couldn't even voice aloud to herself: *There are whispers in the back of my skull, Viv. They talk all day, all night, and I am slowly losing my mind to them.*

The whispers only spoke when Stix was aboveground, out of the under-city. They only screamed when she was far away from this door. When she was here with it, though, they were quiet.

It had started with dreams two weeks ago. Darkness and screaming and a pain in her neck that woke her in the night. She found her sheets soaked, sweat sliding off her in thick rivulets.

A week after that, the shadows had started coming during the day. Little flickers of movement that made her fear her already weak vision might be getting worse. The shadows only lasted a few days, though. Then they vanished and the whispers began.

The whispers were the worst part yet, because she could never *quite* hear them. It reminded her of a cadet she'd trained, who, no matter how much she told him to speak up, never got his voice above a squeak. The majority of what he said went forever unheard, forever lost to the din around him.

These whispers were like that.

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At times, Stix thought them a hundred different voices speaking inside her brain. Other times she thought them only one, as if all those separate sounds and languages were blended together like a vast orchestra playing a single tune.

One voice or many, it did not change the fact that none of the words made sense. It was a language—or languages—she did not know.

Worse yet, the low, inaudible murmur of the voices never ceased. All day, all night, they followed Stix. Always incomprehensible, always angry, and they expected Stix to do something about it.

*But I can't hear you!* she had mentally screamed a thousand times in the past two weeks. Twice, she had even slipped up and barked it aloud.

Her only relief came from Pin's Keep. The boisterous bustle of the crowded main room, where the homeless and hungry came for food. Where all that noise could, for a time, drown out the maddening whispers. But only in the under-city did Stix feel truly at home.

There, the whispers shifted from furious to cajoling. *Come*, they seemed to say in words that had no meaning. *Come this way, keep coming.*

Every night Stix followed, knowing tomorrow she would regret it. Tomorrow, she would be exhausted with her head pounding and the whispers returned. But the call of the city was always stronger, and every night, she gave in.

Even now, when Stix should have been helping families move in or overseeing dam reconstruction, she wasn't. It was her father's birthday too, and she'd promised him a trip to the Cleaved Man. Instead, here she was, standing in front of this door to nowhere. *Again.* But there were no more answers here than there had been last night or any other night before it. Only the faint hum of *Come this way, keep coming.*

"I can't," Stix told them. Then she rubbed her eyes—by the Twelve, they burned—and turned away.

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Stix was in the Cisterns, tracing the same path Vivia would have taken to reach the surface, when she passed a marking on the limestone wall. It wasn't new; she'd seen it a hundred times before today.

For some reason, though, *today* it gave her pause. For some reason, even though water thundered this way through the tunnel, Stix's feet slowed. Her gaze raked up and down the image.

It was a relief of Lady Baile, patron saint of change, seasons, and crossroads. In one hand, she held a trout, and in the other, wheat. The limestone saint stood as tall as Stix, so worn by time that her fox-shaped mask was missing. Actually, most of the head was missing.

But not the eyes, and it was the eyes that had hooked Stix's attention. It was the eyes that were causing the voices to rustle and churn.

This time, though, they spoke in a language she knew—and this time, they were telling her where to go. Telling her how to come and keep coming.

"Hye," she said, the sound lost to the waters rushing this way. "I'll be there soon."

Abruptly, the choir in her skull silenced. Then the Cistern tide reached her. Frothy, violent, and bound to the magic singing in Stix's veins. She let it carry her away, because there was no reason to retrace Vivia's steps now. No reason to return to Queen's Hill or travel to the dam.

Stix needed to go south.

*Come this way, keep coming.*

# SEVEN



Aeduan awoke, confused. There had been pain and fire and impossible dreams—dreams he could not quite remember. Iseult had been there, though, while they slept within a pyre beside a spring.

When his eyelids scratched up, soft light seared into them. He was in the cave that Owl had made, where the mountain bat's stink overpowered all other smells. But not his magic. He sensed Owl nearby, the rosewater- and wool-wrapped lullabies that thrummed inside her veins. And if she was still here, then Iseult must still be here too. Not just in dreams but in waking.

He had no explanation for why Iseult had remained, nor could he deny the relief seeping through him that she had.

Clearing his throat, Aeduan twisted sideways—only to find Owl squatting beside him, her big, teardrop eyes unblinking.

“Breakfast,” she declared, thrusting a wooden bowl at Aeduan's face. Earthworms wriggled within, and it took all Aeduan's self-control not to recoil. Instead, he sat up. His blanket fell back; cold air swept against him. For some reason, he was missing his shirt.

“Blueberry's favorite,” Owl explained, and as if to prove the point, the beast ducked out from the back of the cave, where shadows reigned. The musty bat stench rolled over Aeduan. His breath steamed into Aeduan's face.

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The worms continued to writhe.

Owl shoved the bowl in closer. "Eat."

Aeduan accepted the bowl, which set Blueberry to snuffing right in his ear. Hot, damp snuffs. He waved Blueberry back and glanced toward the sliver of daylight that marked the entrance. "I . . . need water first, Owl."

The girl seemed satisfied with this, and after watching Aeduan stumble to his feet, she snuggled into the still-warm blankets and Blueberry settled down behind her.

Rock scraped Aeduan's chest as he slid outside. Gooseflesh prickled down his exposed skin. The air here was much colder, even with sunlight to warm the midmorning fog. He shivered and forced his feet to move away from the cave and to the edge of evergreens. Once there, where undergrowth and moss clotted thick, he dumped the bowl of worms. Three days since Owl had started speaking again, and already she'd become a wealth of trouble.

Aeduan placed the empty bowl atop a stone for later retrieval, yet as he stood there crouched over, an ache stung at his chest—like a dagger between the ribs. Without warning, he coughed. And coughed. And *coughed*. The onslaught would not subside, until eventually, a soft hand came to his back. Cautious. Concerned. Startling enough to give him pause. Then the Threadwitch's inscrutable face swung down to peer into his. "Are you all right?"

Aeduan did not try to straighten. Shadows crossed his vision. Frustration throbbed in his chest. What was this weakness? What was this ailment? His magic should have healed him by now. "What . . . happened?" he asked from a throat made of acid.

"I was going to ask you the same." She helped him rise. Her hands were warm against his skin. "Do you not remember returning?"

"No," he admitted. Iseult was near enough for him to spot streaks of green in her eyes. To spot how cold had colored her nose to pink. It reminded him of his dream with gentle flames and serenity on her face. She had uttered his name, her eyes never opening, and her fingers had gripped at his hips and stolen his breath.

She stole his breath now, and he had no breath to spare.

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He jerked away from her. The conifers dipped and bled. “Where is my shirt?”

A flush swept up her cheeks. She motioned vaguely up the hill. “It’s drying. I-I . . . washed it.”

“Oh.” He forced himself to straighten fully. It made everything hurt. “I will get it then.” He shifted as if to stride away, but either the movement was too quick, or his body was truly too weak, for the black rushed in once more. With it came coughing. Then the Threadwitch’s fingers were upon him once more, and when she guided him toward a low campfire and helped him to sit, he did not protest.

He *could* not protest.

A pot sat beside the dying fire, a damp cloth dangling from one side. Iseult scooped water into a cup. “Drink.”

He complied, and though the warm liquid felt like broken glass against his throat, he welcomed the pain. It sent the black scampering away. The coughing too.

“If you had let me come with you,” Iseult said while he drank, “then I could have helped you navigate the path.” It was an argument they’d had three times before: should Iseult join him or should she stay with Owl? If she came, then she could read the Nomatsi road and help Aeduan reach the slaughter sites uninjured. If she remained, she could prevent Owl and Blueberry from generating inevitable trouble.

“The traps were mostly triggered when I arrived,” he said. A lie. Although there had been several corpses, dressed in what he now realized was Purist gray, the bulk of the road had been navigated without triggering any protections.

Aeduan could only assume that the men who attacked knew what they were doing. The Nomatsi tribe had been killed without warning, just as the previous two had been.

He finished the water before saying: “It was the largest tribe yet. All dead.”

“Oh.” A mere sigh of sound, of resignation, even as Iseult’s face stayed impassive. “But if the traps were triggered, how did you get hit with so many arrows?”

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“I found someone still alive. A monk. But he was not trained to fight. I . . . had to deal with him.”

Iseult’s eyes widened. A fraction of a movement, yet enough for Aeduan to catch. Enough for him to add, “I did not kill him,” even if he did not know why he wanted to clarify. “He was wounded when I found him, and after he died, I stayed to bury him. That was when I triggered the traps.”

Another soft sigh. Then she sank into a cross-legged position beside him. “Did he see who attacked them?”

Aeduan nodded, though instantly wished he hadn’t. The world spun. “The monk,” he forced out, eyes wincing shut, “said it was the Purists.”

“Not raiders then?”

“I do not know.” Again, a lie, but he saw no reason to tell Iseult that he knew of Purists working with the Raider King. That he knew of one Purist in particular, working with his father.

“Corlant,” she said, filling in one of the gaps on her own. “He was there, wasn’t he?” Without waiting for a reply, she tugged something from her coat pockets, then opened her hands for Aeduan to see.

Two arrowheads shone black against her pale palms. Both bits of iron were bloodstained, but only one gave off any blood-scent—Aeduan’s own.

“This one injured me in Dalmotti.” She furled her left fingers into a fist. “And this one I pulled from you at dawn. I think they’re cursed. No,” she amended, head shaking, “I *know* they are. Owl called it ‘bad earth.’”

*Bad earth.* He glanced down at his chest, at the six old scars that marked his flesh and the four new puckers on his belly—puckers that should not be there at all, just as the seventeen holes in his back should not be there either. He’d had more than enough time to heal.

“Corlant,” Iseult continued, “can do that. He . . .” She tapped at her right biceps. “He almost killed me with a cursed arrow in Dalmotti.” There was a strain to her voice now, like a fiddle pulled too tight. “I was unconscious for a long time. I-I almost died.”

“That cannot happen to me. I am a Bloodwitch.”

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She shrugged as if to say *How can you be so sure?* Aloud, though, she said: “Why was he with this tribe? The Midenzis are on the other side of the Jadansi. Unless . . .” She trailed off, a tiny frown wrinkling her brow.

Aeduan offered no reply. Lying did not come naturally to him, and he had already pushed his limits. Silence seemed his best option now.

For a long moment, Iseult gazed at him, unblinking. As inscrutable as all Threadwitches were trained to be. Behind her, the fire popped, and a final burst of flame guttered upward. Smoke gathered. A soft breeze pitched across Aeduan’s bare skin.

He wanted his shirt back.

“We need a proper healer,” Iseult said at last, giving a pointed glance to Aeduan’s stomach. “We need better healing supplies, too, and we’re out of lanolin for our blades.”

*We*, Aeduan thought, and before he could argue—before he could ask *Why we?* or even *Why did you wait the whole night instead of leaving?*—Iseult was on her feet and circling behind him. Trails from the movement streaked across his vision. Smoke and flesh and flame.

“You’re bleeding again,” she murmured. Then her fingers were on him once more, warm and sure while she pressed the damp cloth to his back. He hadn’t even seen her pick it up.

“No.” He reached around to take the cloth from her hand. “I can do it,” he tried to say, but the twisting in his ribs, the stretching of the wounds down his back, set his lungs to spasming once more.

This time, the coughing would not abate. Even after two cups of water, he could not suck in enough air. So when Iseult tried a second time to dab away the blood that never stopped falling, he did not protest.

Nor did he protest when she said, “We should go to Tirla, Aeduan. I know it is a Marstoki stronghold, but we can find a healer in a city that size. And we can get fresh supplies too.”

*We, we, we.*

The damp cloth felt like razors against his skin. Everything hurt in ways that it should not, and his shredded throat would soon bleed if he did not stop this coughing. He was weak; he hated it. Carawen

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monks were meant to be prepared for anything, and Aeduan had always prided himself on being doubly so. Yet over the last two weeks, he'd been ill-equipped and constantly unsteady.

It didn't help that Aeduan had never worked for free before. It was a nagging pressure along the back of his neck. Like words tickling: *You should be getting paid. Each moment that passes is another coin lost.* It was also another moment in which he had not contacted his father or pursued the coins owed to him.

Two weeks ago, Aeduan would have followed the scent of clear lakes and frozen winters—the ghost who had stolen his coins and aided Prince Leopold in Nubrevna. Two weeks ago, he would have also returned to Lejna and claimed those coins from where Iseult said they were hidden. And two weeks ago, he would have looked at each passing massacre and felt nothing. After all, death was inevitable in wartime, and as his father always said: *Life is the price of justice.*

But two weeks ago, he had not found Owl, bound and drugged by raiders claiming his father's banner. Two weeks ago, he had not encountered dead Nomatsi tribes and recognized the scents of his father's men amidst the slaughter.

And two weeks ago, he had not been traveling with a woman to whom he owed more life-debts than he could keep track of, and with more life-debts stacking between them each day.

Like right now. She tended him, and Aeduan did not know why—nor did he know how to tally such ministrations. He simply knew he was indebted. He simply knew he could not leave until he had paid her back.

And there was still the problem of Owl's missing tribe. Of the scent like summer heather and impossible choices, still alive. Still somewhere in the mountains ahead.

"Yes," Aeduan agreed at last, a ragged sound between coughs. "Let us go to Tirla."

It had been raining on the day Aeduan learned his father still lived. Aeduan had gone to a Monastery outpost in Tirla for his next

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Carawen assignment. So many had requested him specifically in those days, and this time was no different. One mission, however, had caught his attention above the rest.

He could remember the words exactly.

*Bloodwitch monk needed to find a hound named Boots  
Meet at farmstead north of Tirla, blue wind-flags above the gate*

Aeduan's childhood dog had been named Boots. He had killed that dog; maybe he could save this one.

Except that when he reached the dilapidated farmstead, there was only a man waiting to see him in a small house with a thatched roof.

Aeduan drew a knife before entering. He did not sheathe it for many hours, even though the man seated on the stool beside the hearth was an unmistakable reflection of Aeduan—except for the lines around hazel eyes and a gray fringe that brightened his hair.

"It is you," the man had said in a gravelly voice that hummed deep in Aeduan's chest. A voice that still told the story of the monster and the honey in Aeduan's dreams.

Aeduan did not put away his knife. He did not react at all, even as the man rose. Even as he said, "Aeduan, my son."

Ghosts, after all, did not return from the dead.

"You're alive." The man spoke Nomatsi, a language Aeduan had not used in over a decade. "I . . . thought you were dead."

Aeduan had thought the same. He said nothing, though, and neither man sat. Both men stared.

"Your mother," the man began, a question in his tone.

But Aeduan shook his head. A single hard snap. Dysi had not survived. Aeduan would not say so aloud.

A pained inhale from the man, before he gave a curt, almost businesslike nod. "Twice I have loved," he said. "Twice empires have taken everything from me." Then he swallowed. He frowned, and for the first time in many, many years, Aeduan recalled that yes, his father *had* had another family. Daughters and a wife that had died.

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“So you must see,” the man continued, “why having my son returned to me . . . It is more than I ever dared hope.” He spoke so simply, as if commenting on the weather. As if describing how best to evade an enemy’s blow.

Such flat tones for such desperate words, yet somehow, this made their meaning cut deeper, and for the first time since entering the thatched-roof house, Aeduan spoke.

“Tell me where you have been.”

His father complied.

Aeduan learned that in the fifteen years since the attack on their tribe, Ragnor had moved to Arithuania, following Nomatsis on the run and witches cast out by their empires. He learned his father had built an army meant to end imperial tyranny once and for all.

And he learned that his father had a place for him at his side, if Aeduan was willing to take it.

Aeduan was.

In the end, the blood-scent had convinced him that this man was indeed his father. It had changed in fifteen years, though—the bloodied iron and sleeping ice might still remain, but gone were the nighttime songs and the loving hounds that he remembered. Now there was fire. Now there was inconsolable loss. It stained every piece of Ragnor’s blood. It gave his eyes a weight that no one else could understand.

No one but Aeduan, who had been there on the day everything had been taken away from them.

In the end, it was Ragnor’s words that had convinced Aeduan to actually join him. And since that day in the thatched-roof house, his course had been so clear. Aeduan had never second-guessed. He had never hesitated. Coin and the cause. Coin and the cause. No space for personal wants, and no desire for them either. He had given up hope so very long ago. There was only action, only moving forward. Coin and the cause. Coin and the cause.

Until two weeks ago.

Now everything was muddied. Now Aeduan felt trapped between duty and life-debts. Between his father and a child. He could not fully

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serve Ragnor while also searching for Owl's tribe. He could not find Owl a home—or repay Iseult what he owed—while also remaining committed to coin and the cause.

He was caught, like the man from the tale who wanted to feed his family during a blizzard, but could not bear to kill the lamb. In the end, everyone died of starvation, including the lamb.

For Lady Fate makes all men choose eventually. Even Blood-witches.