

THE
GILDED
WOLVES

NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLING AUTHOR

ROSHANI CHOKSHI



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Fléctere si néqueo súperos Acheronta movebo.

If I cannot move heaven, I will raise hell.

— VIRGIL

Once, there were four Houses of France.

Like all the other Houses within the Order of Babel, the French faction swore to safeguard the location of their Babel Fragment, the source of all Forging power.

Forging was a power of creation rivaled only by the work of God.

But one House fell.

And another House's line died without an heir.

Now all that is left is a secret.



PROLOGUE



The matriarch of House Kore was running late for a dinner. In the normal course of things, she did not care for punctuality. Punctuality, with its unseemly whiff of eagerness, was for peasants. And she was neither a peasant nor eager to endure a meal with the mongrel heir of House Nyx.

“What is taking my carriage so long?” she yelled down the hall.

If she arrived too late, she would invite rumors. Which were a great deal more pesky and unseemly than punctuality.

She flicked at an invisible speck of dust on her new dress. Her silk gown had been designed by the couturiers of Raudnitz & Cie in the 1st arrondissement’s Place Vendôme. Taffeta lilies bobbed in the blue silk stream of her hemline. Across the gown’s low bustle and long tulle train, miniature fields of buttercups and ivy unfurled in the candlelight. The Forging work had been seamless. As well it should be, given the steep price.

Her driver poked his head through the entryway. “Deepest apologies, Madame. We are very nearly ready.”

The matriarch flicked her wrist in dismissal. Her Babel Ring—a twist of dark thorns shot through with blue light—gleamed. The ring had been welded to her index finger the day she became matriarch of House Kore, successfully beating out other members of her family and intra-House scrambles for power. She knew her descendants and even members of her House were counting down the days until she died and passed on the ring, but she wasn't ready yet. And until then, only she and the House Nyx patriarch would know the ring's secrets.

When she touched the wallpaper, a symbol flashed briefly on the gilded patterns: a twist of thorns. She smiled. Like every Forged object in her home, the wallpaper had been House-marked.

She'd never forget the first time she'd left her House mark on an artifact. The ring's power made her feel like a goddess cinched to human shape. Though that was not always the case. Yesterday, she'd stripped the mark of Kore off an object. She hadn't wanted to, but it was for last week's Order auction, and some traditions could not be denied . . .

Including dinners with the head of a House.

The matriarch marched toward the open door and stood on the granite threshold. The cold night air caused the silken blooms on her dress to close their petals.

"Surely the horses are ready?" she called into the night.

Her driver did not answer. She pulled her shawl tighter and took another step outside. She saw the carriage, the waiting horses . . . but no driver.

"Has *everyone* in my employ been struck by a plague of incompetence?" she muttered as she walked toward the horses.

Even her courier—who was merely to show up at the Order auction, donate an object and leave—had failed. To his lists of clear-cut

errands, he'd undoubtedly added: Get fabulously drunk at L'Eden, that gaudy sinkhole of a hotel.

Closer to the carriage, she found her driver sprawled facedown in the gravel. The matriarch stumbled backward. Around her, the sounds of the horses stamping their hooves cut off abruptly. Silence fell like a heavy blade through the air.

Who is there? she meant to say, but the words collapsed noiselessly.

She stepped back. Her heels made no sound on the gravel. She might have been underwater. She ran for the door, flinging it open. Chandelier light washed over her and for a moment, she thought she'd escaped. Her heel caught on her dress, tripping her. The ground did not rush up to meet her.

But a knife did.

She never saw the blade, only felt the consequence of it—a sharp pressure digging into her knuckles, the snap of finger bones unclasping, hot wetness sliding down her palm and wrist and staining her expensive bell sleeves. Someone prying her ring from her fingers. The matriarch of House Kore did not have time to gasp.

Her eyes opened wide. In front of her, Forged moth lights with emerald panes for wings glided across the ceiling. A handful of them roosted there, like dozing stars.

And then, from the corner of her vision, a heavy rod swung toward her head.



PART I

From the archival records of the Order of Babel

The Origins of Empire

Master Emanuele Orsatti, House Orcus of the Order's Italy Faction

1878, reign of King Umberto I

The art of Forging is as old as civilization itself. According to our translations, ancient empires credited the source of their Forging power to a variety of mythical artifacts. India believed their source of power came from the Bowl of Brahma, a creation deity. Persians credited the mythical Cup of Jamshid, et cetera.

Their beliefs—while vivid and imaginative—are wrong.

Forging comes from the presence of Babel Fragments. Though none can ascertain the exact number of Fragments in existence, it is the belief of this author that God saw fit to disperse at least five Fragments following the destruction of the Tower of Babel (Genesis 11:4-9). Where these Babel Fragments scattered, civilizations sprouted: Egyptians and Africans near the Nile River, Hindus near the Indus River, Orientals from the Yellow River, Mesopotamians from the Tigris-Euphrates River, Mayans and Aztecs in Mesoamerica,

and the Incas in the Central Andes. Naturally, wherever a Babel Fragment existed, the art of Forging flourished.

The West's first documentation of its Babel Fragment was in the year 1112. Our ancestral brethren, the Knights Templar, brought back a Babel Fragment from the Holy Lands and laid it to rest in our soil. Since then, the art of Forging has achieved levels of unparalleled mastery throughout the continent. To those blessed with a Forging affinity, it is an inheritance of divinity, like any art. For just as we are made in His image, so, too, does the Forging artistry reflect the beauty of His creation. To Forge is not only to enhance a creation, but to reshape it.

It is the duty of the Order to safeguard this ability.

It is our task, sacred and ordained, to guard the location of the West's Babel Fragment.

To take such power from us would be, I daresay, the end of civilization.

I



SÉVERIN

One week earlier . . .

Séverin glanced at the clock: two minutes left. Around him, the masked members of the Order of Babel whipped out white fans, murmuring to themselves as they eagerly awaited the final auction bidding.

Séverin tipped back his head. On the frescoed ceiling, dead gods fixed the crowd with flat stares. He fought not to look at the walls, but failed. The symbols of the remaining two Houses of the French faction hemmed him on all sides. Crescent moons for House Nyx. Thorns for House Kore.

The other two symbols had been carefully lifted out of the design.

“Ladies and gentlemen of the Order, our spring auction is at its close,” announced the auctioneer. “Thank you for bearing witness to this extraordinary exchange. As you know, the objects of this evening’s auction have been rescued from far-flung locales like the deserts of North Africa and dazzling palaces of Indo-Chine. Once more,

we give thanks and honor to the two Houses of France who agreed to host this spring's auction. House Nyx, we honor you. House Kore, we honor you."

Séverin raised his hands, but refused to clap. The long scar down his palm silvered beneath the chandelier light, a reminder of the inheritance he had been denied.

Séverin, last of the Montagnet-Alarie line and heir to House Vanth, whispered its name anyway. *House Vanth, I honor you.*

Ten years ago, the Order had declared the line of House Vanth dead.

The Order had lied.

While the auctioneer launched into a long-winded speech about the hallowed and burdensome duties of the Order, Séverin touched his stolen mask. It was a tangle of metal thorns and roses gilded with frost, Forged so the ice never melted and the roses never wilted. The mask belonged to the House Kore courier who, if Séverin's dosage had been correct, was currently drooling in a lavish suite at his hotel, L'Eden.

According to his intelligence, the object he had come here for would be on the auction block any moment now. He knew what would happen next. Light bidding would take place, but everyone suspected House Nyx had fixed the round to win the object. And though House Nyx would win, that artifact was going home with Séverin.

The corner of his lips tipped into a smile as he raised his fingers. At once, a glass from the champagne chandelier floating above him broke off and sailed into his hand. He lifted the flute to his lips, not sipping, but once more noting the ballroom's layout and exits just over the glass rim. Tiers of pearly macarons in the shape of a giant swan marked the east exit. There, the young heir of House Nyx, Hypnos, drained a champagne flute and motioned for another. Séverin had not spoken to Hypnos since they were young.

As children, they had been something of playmates and rivals, both raised almost identically, both groomed to take their fathers' rings.

But that was a lifetime ago.

Séverin forced his gaze from Hynnos and looked instead to the lapis-blue columns guarding the south exit. At the west, four Sphinx authorities stood motionless in their suits and crocodile masks.

They were the reason no one could steal from the Order. The mask of a Sphinx could sniff out and follow any trace of an object that had been House-marked by a matriarch's or patriarch's ring.

But Séverin knew that all the artifacts came to the auction clean, and were only House-marked at the auction's conclusion when they were claimed. Which left a few precious moments between time of sale and time of claiming in which an object could be stolen. And no one, not even a Sphinx, would be able to trace where it had gone.

A vulnerable unmarked object was not, however, without its protections.

Séverin glanced at the north end, diagonally from him, toward the holding room—the place where all unmarked objects awaited their new owners. At the entrance crouched a gigantic quartz lion. Its crystalline tail whipped lazily against the marble floor.

A gong rang. Séverin looked to the podium where a light-skinned man had stepped onto the stage.

“Our final object is one we are most delighted to showcase. Salvaged from the Summer Palace of China in 1860, this compass was Forged sometime during the Han Dynasty. Its abilities include navigating the stars and detecting lies from truth,” said the auctioneer. “It measures twelve by twelve centimeters, and weighs 1.2 kilograms.”

Above the auctioneer's head, a hologram of the compass shimmered. It looked like a rectangular piece of metal, with a spherical

indentation at its center. Chinese characters crimped the metal on all sides.

The list of the compass's abilities was impressive, but it was not the compass that intrigued him. It was the treasure map hidden inside. Out the corner of his eye, Séverin watched Hypnos clap his hands together eagerly.

"Bidding starts at five hundred thousand francs."

A man from the Italian faction raised his fan.

"Five hundred thousand to Monsieur Monserro. Do I see—"

Hypnos raised his hand.

"Six hundred thousand," said the auctioneer. "Six hundred thousand going once, twice—"

The members began to talk amongst themselves. There was no point trying in a fixed round.

"Sold!" said the auctioneer with forced cheer. "To House Nyx for six hundred thousand. Patriarch Hypnos, at the conclusion of the auction, please have your House courier and designated servant sent to the holding room for the customary eight-minute appraisal. The object will be waiting in the designated vessel where you may mark it with your ring."

Séverin waited a moment before excusing himself. He walked briskly along the edges of the atrium until he made it to the quartz lion. Behind the lion stretched a darkened hall lined with marble pillars. The quartz lion's eyes slid indifferently to him, and Séverin fought the urge to touch his stolen mask. Disguised as the House Kore courier, he was allowed to enter the holding room and touch a single object for exactly eight minutes. He hoped the stolen mask would be enough to get him past the lion, but if the lion asked to see his catalogue coin for verification—a Forged coin that held the location of every object in House Kore's possession—he'd be dead. He hadn't been able to find the dratted thing anywhere on the courier.

Séverin bowed before the quartz lion, then held still. The lion did nothing. Its unblinking gaze burned his face as moments ticked past. His breath started to feel sticky in his lungs. He hated how much he wanted this artifact. There were so many *wants* inside him that he doubted there was room for blood in his body.

Séverin didn't look up from the floor until he heard it—the scrape of stones rearranging. He let out his breath. His temples pulsed as the door to the holding room appeared. Without the lion's permission, the Forged door would have remained unseen.

All along the walls of the holding room, marble statues of gods and creatures from myth leaned out of recessed niches. Séverin walked straight to a marble figure of the snarling, bull-headed minotaur. Séverin raised his pocket knife to the statue's flared nostrils. Warm breath fogged the Forged blade. In one smooth line, Séverin dragged the blade's tip down the statue's face and body. It split open; the marble hissed and steamed as his historian stumbled out of it and fell against him. Enrique gasped, shaking himself.

"You hid me in a *minotaur*? Why couldn't Tristan make a hiding dimension in a handsome Greek god?"

"His affinity is for liquid matter. Stone is difficult for him," said Séverin, pocketing the knife. "So it was either the minotaur or an Etruscan vase decorated with bull testicles."

Enrique shuddered. "Honestly. Who looks at a vase covered in bull testicles and says, 'You. I must have you.'?"

"The bored, the rich, and the enigmatic."

Enrique sighed. "All my life aspirations."

The two of them turned to the circle of treasure, many of them Forged ancient relics looted from temples and palaces. Statues and strands of jewels, measuring devices and telescopes.

At the back of the room, an onyx bear representing House Nyx glowered at them, its jaws cracked wide. Beside it, an emerald eagle

representing House Kore shook its wings. Animals representing the other Order factions all around the world stood at attention, including a brown bear carved of fire opal for Russia, a wolf sculpted of beryl for Italy, even an obsidian eagle for the German Empire.

Enrique dug inside his costume of an Order servant and pulled out a rectangular piece of metal identical to the compass House Nyx had won.

Séverin took the fake artifact.

“Still waiting on my thanks, you know,” huffed Enrique. “It took me *ages* to research and assemble that.”

“It would have taken less time if you didn’t antagonize Zofia.”

“It’s inevitable. If I breathe, your engineer is prepared to launch warships.”

“Then hold your breath.”

“That should be easy enough,” said Enrique, rolling his eyes. “I do it every time we acquire a new piece.”

Séverin laughed. Acquiring was what he called his *particular hobby*. It sounded . . . aristocratic. Wholesome, even. He had the Order to thank for his acquisition habit. After denying his claim as heir of House Vanth, they’d blackballed him from every auction house, so he could not legally purchase Forged antiquities. If they hadn’t done that, perhaps he wouldn’t have gotten so curious about what objects they were keeping him from in the first place. Some of those objects were, as it turned out, his family’s possessions. After the Montagnet-Alarie line was declared dead, all the possessions of House Vanth had been sold. In the months after Séverin turned sixteen and liquidated his legal trust, he had reclaimed each and every one. After that, he’d offered his acquisition services to international museums and colonial guilds, any organization that wished to take back what the Order had first stolen.

If the rumors about the compass were right, it might allow him to blackmail the Order, and then he could acquire the only thing he still wanted: his House.

“You’re doing it again,” said Enrique.

“What?”

“That whole nefarious-whilst-looking-into-the-distance thing. What are you hiding, Séverin?”

“Nothing.”

“You and your secrets.”

“Secrets keep my hair lustrous,” said Séverin, running his hand through his curls. “Shall we?”

Enrique nodded. “Room check.”

He tossed a Forged sphere into the air where it hung, suspended. Light burst from the object, sliding down the walls and over the objects to scan them.

“No recording devices.”

At Séverin’s nod, they positioned themselves before the onyx bear of House Nyx. It stood on a raised dais, its jaws parted enough so the red velvet box holding the Chinese compass shone bright as an apple. The moment Séverin touched the box, he had less than eight minutes to return it. Or—his gaze went to the beast’s shining teeth—the creature would take it back forcefully.

He removed the red box. At the same time, Enrique drew out a pair of scales. First, they weighed the box with the original compass, then marked the number before preparing to switch it with the decoy.

Enrique cursed. “Off by a hair. But it should work. The difference is hardly discernible by the scales.”

Séverin’s jaw clenched. It didn’t matter if it was hardly discernible by the scales. It mattered if the difference was discernible to the onyx bear. But he’d come too far to back away now.

Séverin placed the box in the bear's mouth, pushing it in until his wrist disappeared. Onyx teeth scraped against his arm. The statue's throat was cool and dry, and entirely too still. His hand shook.

"Are you breathing?" whispered Enrique. "I'm definitely not."

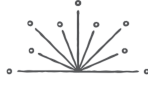
"Not helping," growled Séverin.

Now he was up to his elbow. The bear was rigid. It didn't even blink.

Why hasn't it accepted the box?

A creaking sound lit up the silence. Séverin jerked his hand back. Too late. The bear's teeth lengthened in a blink, forming narrow little bars. Enrique took one look at Séverin's trapped hand, turned pale, and bit out a single word: "Shit."

2



LAILA

Laila slipped into the hotel room of the House Kore courier. Her dress, a discarded housekeeper uniform fished out of the dregs of storage, snagged on the doorframe. She grumbled, yanking it, only for a seam to unravel.

“Perfect,” she muttered.

She turned to face the room. Like all the L’Eden guest rooms, the courier’s suite was lavishly appointed and designed. The only piece that looked out of place was the unconscious courier, lying face-down in a pool of his saliva. Laila frowned.

“They could’ve at least left you in your bed, poor thing,” she said, toeing him so he turned over onto his back.

For the next ten minutes, Laila redecorated. From the pockets of her housekeeper’s dress, she threw women’s earrings on the floor, draped torn stockings over lamp fixtures, mussed the bed, and poured champagne over the sheets. When she was done, she knelt beside the courier.

“A parting gift,” she said. “Or apology. However you see fit.”

She took out her official cabaret calling card. Then she lifted the man's thumb and pressed it to the paper. It shimmered iridescent, words blooming to life. The Palais des Rêves' calling cards were forged to recognize a patron's thumbprint. Only the courier could read what it said, and only when he touched it. She slid the card into the breast pocket of his jacket, scanning the lettering before it melted into the cream paper:

Palais des Rêves

90 boulevard de Clichy

Tell them L'Énigme sent you . . .

A party invitation sounded like a poor consolation prize for getting knocked unconscious, but this was different. The Palais des Rêves was Paris's most exclusive cabaret, and next week they were throwing a party in honor of the hundredth anniversary of the French Revolution. Invitations currently sold on the black market for the price of diamonds. But it wasn't just the cabaret that had people excited. In a few weeks' time, the city would host the 1889 Exposition Universelle, a gigantic world fair celebrating the powers of Europe and the inventions that would pave the way for the new century, which meant that L'Eden Hôtel was running at full capacity.

"I doubt you'll remember this, but do try and order the chocolate-covered strawberries at the Palais," she said to the courier. "They're utterly divine."

Laila checked the grandfather clock: half past eight. Séverin and Enriquer weren't due back for at least an hour, but she couldn't stop checking the time. Hope flared painfully behind her ribs. She'd spent two years looking for a breakthrough in her search for the ancient book, and this treasure map could be the answer to every prayer. *They'll be fine*, she told herself. Acquisitions were hardly new to any

of them. When Laila had first started working with Séverin, he was trying to earn back his family's possessions. In return, he helped in her search for an ancient book. The book had no title she knew of . . . her only lead was that it belonged to the Order of Babel.

Going after a treasure map hidden inside a compass sounded rather tame in comparison to former trips. Laila still hadn't forgotten the time she ended up dangling over Nisyros Island's active volcano in pursuit of an ancient diadem. But this acquisition was different. If Enrique's research and Séverin's intelligence reports were correct, that one tiny compass could change the direction of their lives. Or, in Laila's case, let her keep this life.

Distracted, Laila smoothed her hands across her dress.

A mistake.

She should never touch anything when her thoughts were too frenzied. That single unguarded moment had allowed the dress's memories to knife into her thoughts: *chrysanthemum petals clinging to the wet hem, brocade stretched over the carriage footstool, hands folded in prayer, and then—*

Blood.

Blood everywhere, the carriage overturned, bone snapping through the fabric—

Laila winced, snatching back her hand. But it was too late. The dress's memories caught her and held tight. Laila squeezed her eyes shut, pinching her skin as hard as she could. The sharp pain felt like a red flame in her thoughts, and her consciousness wrapped around that pain as if it would lead her out of the dark. When the memories faded, she opened her eyes. Laila pulled down her sleeve, her hands shaking.

For a moment, Laila crouched on the floor, her arms around her knees. Séverin had called her ability "invaluable" before she told him *why* she could read the objects around her. After that, he was too

startled, or perhaps too horrified, to say anything. Out of the whole group, only Séverin knew her touch could draw out an object's secret history. Invaluable or not, this ability was not . . . normal.

She was not normal.

Laila gathered herself off the floor, her hands still shaking as she left the room.

In the servants' stairway, Laila shucked off the housekeeper uniform and changed into her worn kitchen uniform. The hotel's second kitchen was dedicated strictly to baking, and during the evening hours, it belonged to her. She wasn't due on the Palais des Rêves stage until next week, which left her with nothing but free time for her second job.

In the narrow hallway, L'Eden's waitstaff bustled past her. They carried chilled oysters on the half shell, quail eggs floating in bone marrow soup, steaming coq au vin that left the hall smelling like burgundy wine and buttery garlic. Without her trademark mask and headdress, not one of them recognized her as the cabaret star L'Énigme. Here, she was simply another person, another worker.

Alone in the baking kitchen, Laila surveyed the marble counter strewn with culinary scales, paintbrushes, edible pearls in a glass dish, and—as of this afternoon—a croquembouche tower nearly two meters high. She had been up at dawn baking choux pastry balls, filling them with sweetened cream, and making sure that every sphere was the perfect coin-gold of dawn before rolling them in caramel and stacking them into a pyramid. All that was left was the decoration.

L'Eden had already won all manner of accolades for its fine dining—Séverin would accept nothing less—but it was the desserts that lit up the guests' dreams. Laila's desserts, though absent of Forging, were like edible magic. Her cakes took the shape of ballerinas

with outstretched arms—their hair spun sugar and edible gold, their skin pale as cream and strewn with sweet pearl dust.

Guests called her creations “divine.” When she stepped into the kitchen, she felt like a deity surveying the slivers of a universe not yet made. She breathed easier in the kitchen. Sugar and flour and salt had no memory. Here, her touch was just that. A touch. A distance closed, an action brought to an end.

An hour later, she was putting the finishing touches on a cake when the door slammed open. Laila sighed, but she didn’t look up. She knew who it was.

Six months after Laila had started working for Séverin, she and Enrique had been playing cards in the stargazing room when Séverin walked in carrying a dirty, underfed Polish girl with eyes bluer than a candle’s heart. Séverin set her down on the couch, introduced her as his engineer, and that was that. Only later did Laila discover more about her. Arrested for arson and expelled from university, Zofia possessed a rare Forging affinity for all metals and a sharp mind for numbers.

When she first came to L’Eden, Zofia spoke only to Séverin and seemed utterly uncommunicative when anyone else approached her. One day, Laila noticed that when she brought desserts for meetings, Zofia only ate the pale sugar cookies, leaving all the colorfully decorated desserts untouched. So, the next day, Laila left a plate of them outside Zofia’s door. She did that for three weeks before she got busy one day in the kitchens and forgot. When she opened the door to air the room, she found Zofia holding out an empty plate and staring at her expectantly. That had been a year ago.

Now, without saying a word, Zofia grabbed a clean mixing bowl, filled it with water, and guzzled it on the spot. She dragged her arm across her mouth. Then she reached for a bowl of icing. Laila smacked

her hand, lightly, with a rolling pin. Zofia glowered, then dipped an ink-stained finger into the icing anyway. A moment later, she began absentmindedly stacking the measuring cups according to size. Laila waited patiently. With Zofia, conversations were not initiated so much as caught at random and followed through until the other girl grew bored.

“I set some fires in the House Kore courier’s room.”

Laila dropped the paintbrush. “*What?* You were supposed to wake him up without being in the room!”

“I did? I set them off when I stepped outside. They’re tiny.” When met with Laila’s wide-eyed stare, Zofia abruptly changed the subject. Though, to her, it probably did not seem abrupt at all. “I don’t like crocodile musculature. Séverin wants a decoy of those Sphinx masks—”

“Can we go back to the fire—”

“—the mask won’t meld to human facial expressions. I need to make it work. Oh, I also need a new drawing board.”

“What happened to the last one?”

Zofia inspected the icing bowl and shrugged.

“You broke it,” said Laila.

“My elbow fell into it.”

Laila shook her head and threw Zofia a clean rag. She stared at it, befuddled.

“Why do I need a rag?”

“Because there’s gunpowder on your face.”

“And?”

“. . . and that is mildly alarming, my dear. Clean up.”

Zofia dragged the rag down her face. It seemed Zofia was always emerging from ashes or flames, which earned her the nickname “phoenix” among L’Eden. Not that Zofia minded, even though the

bird didn't exist. As she cleaned her face, the ends of the cloth caught on her unusual necklace, which looked like strung-together knife-points.

"When will they be back?" asked Zofia.

Laila felt a sharp pang. "Enrique and Séverin should be here by nine."

"I need to grab my letters."

Laila frowned. "This late? It's already dark out, Zofia."

Zofia touched her necklace. "I know."

Zofia tossed her the rag. Laila caught it and threw it in the sink. When she turned around, Zofia had grabbed the spoon for the icing.

"Excuse me, phoenix, I need that!"

Zofia stuck the spoon in her mouth.

"Zofia!"

The engineer grinned. Then she swung open the door and ran off, the spoon still sticking out of her mouth.

ONCE SHE FINISHED the dessert, Laila cleaned up and left the kitchen. She was not the official pastry chef, nor did she wish to be, and half the allure of this hobby job was that it was only for pleasure. If she did not wish to make something, she didn't.

The farther she walked down the main serving hall, the more the sounds of L'Eden came alive—laughter ribboning between the glassy murmur of the amber chandeliers and champagne flutes, the hum of Forged moths and their stained-glass wings as they shed colored light in their flight. Laila stopped in front of the Mercury Cabinet, the hotel's messaging service. Small metal boxes marked with the names of the hotel staff sat inside. Laila opened her box with her staff key, not expecting to find anything, when her fingers brushed against

something that felt like cold silk. It was a single black petal pinned to a one-word note:

Envy.

Even without the flower, Laila would have recognized that cramped and slanted handwriting anywhere: Tristan. She had to force herself not to smile. After all, she was still mad at him.

But that would not stop her from accepting a present.

Especially one he had Forged.

Forged. It was a word that still sat strangely on her tongue even though she'd lived in Paris for two years. The empires and kingdoms of the West called Tristan and Zofia's abilities "Forging," but the artistry had other names in other languages. In India, they called it *cbhota saans*, the "small breath," for while only gods breathed life into creation, this art was a small sip of such power. Yet, no matter its name, the rules guiding the affinity were the same.

There were two kinds of Forging affinities: mind and matter. Someone with a matter affinity could influence one of three material states: liquids, solids, or gasses. Both Tristan and Zofia had matter affinities; Zofia's Forging affinity was for solid matter—mostly metals and crystals—and Tristan had an affinity for liquid matter. Specifically, the liquid present in plants.

All Forging was bound by three conditions: the strength of the artisan's will, the clarity of the artistic goal, and the boundaries of their chosen mediums' elemental properties. Which meant that someone with a Forging affinity for solid matter with a specificity in stone would go nowhere without understanding the attendant chemical formulas and properties of the stone they wished to manipulate.

As a rule, the affinity manifested in children no later than thirteen years of age. If the child wished to hone the affinity, he or she could

pursue study. In Europe, most Forging artisans studied for years at renowned institutions or held lengthy apprenticeships. Zofia and Tristan, however, had followed neither of those paths. Zofia, because she had been kicked out of school before she had the chance. And Tristan, because, well, Tristan had no need of it. His landscape artistry looked like the fever dream of a nature spirit. It was unsettling and beautiful, and Paris couldn't get enough of him. At the age of sixteen, the waiting list to commission him stretched into the hundreds.

Laila used to wonder why Tristan stayed at L'Eden. Perhaps it was loyalty to Séverin. Or because L'Eden allowed Tristan to keep his bizarre arachnid displays. But when Laila stepped into the gardens, she *felt* the reason. The perfume of the flowers thick in her lungs. The garden turning jagged and wild in the falling dark. And she understood. Tristan's other clients had so many rules, like House Kore, which had commissioned extravagant topiaries for its upcoming celebration. L'Eden was different. Tristan loved Séverin like a brother, but he stayed here because only in L'Eden could he lift marvels from his mind, free of any demands.

Once she stepped into the gardens of L'Eden, she was inside Tristan's imagination. Despite its name, the gardens were no paradise, but a labyrinth of sins. Seven, to be exact.

The first garden was Lust. Here, red flowers spilled from the hollow mouths of statues. In one corner, Cleopatra coughed up garnet amaryllis and pink-frilled anemone. In another, Helen of Troy whispered zinnia and poppies. Laila moved quickly through the labyrinth. Past Gluttony, where a sky of glossy blooms that smelled of ambrosia closed tight the moment one reached for them. Then Greed, where a gold veneer encased each slender plant. Next came Sloth, with its slow-moving shrubs; Wrath with its fiery florals; then Pride with its gargantuan, moving topiaries of green stags with flowering

antlers and regal lions with manes of jasmine, until finally she was in Envy. Here, a suffusion of greenery, the very shade of sin.

Laila stopped before the Tezcat door propped up near the entrance. To anyone who didn't know its secrets, the Tezcat looked like an ordinary mirror, albeit with a lovely frame that resembled gilded ivy leaves. Tezcat doors were impossible to distinguish from ordinary mirrors without, according to Zofia, a complicated test involving fire and phosphorous. Luckily, she didn't have to go through that. To get to the other side, she simply unlocked it by pinching the fourth gilded ivy leaf on the left side of the frame. A hidden door-knob. Her reflection rippled as the silver of the Tezcat door's mirror thinned to transparency.

Inside was Tristan's workplace. Laila breathed in the scent of earth and roots. All along the walls were small terrariums, landscapes squeezed into miniature form. Tristan made them almost obsessively. When she asked him once, he told her it was because he wished the world were easier. Small enough and manageable enough to fit in the hollow of one's palm.

"Laila!"

Tristan walked toward her with a wide smile on his round face. There was dirt smudged on his clothes and—she breathed a sigh of relief—no sign of his gigantic pet spider.

But she did not return his smile. Instead, she lifted an eyebrow. Tristan wiped his hands down his smock.

"Oh . . . you're still mad?" he asked.

"Yes."

"Would giving you a present make you less mad?"

Laila lifted her chin. "Depends on the present. But first, say it."

Tristan shifted on his feet. "I am sorry."

"For?"

"For putting Goliath on your dressing table."

“Where does Goliath belong? And for that matter, where do *all* your pet insects and whatnot belong?”

Tristan looked wide-eyed. “Not in your room?”

“Close enough.”

He turned to the worktable beside him where a large, frosted glass terrarium took up half the space. He lifted the cover, revealing a single, deep-purple flower. The slender petals looked like snippets of evening sky, a rich velvety purple hungry for the light of stars. Laila traced their edges softly. The petals were almost exactly the same shade of Séverin’s eyes. The thought made her draw back her hand.

“Voilà! Behold your present, Forged with a little bit of silk taken from one of your costumes—”

When he caught her frantic gaze, he added, “One of the ones you were going to throw away, promise!”

Laila relaxed a bit.

“So . . . am I forgiven?”

He already knew he was. But she still decided to draw out the moment a little longer than necessary. She tapped her foot, biding her time and watching Tristan squirm. Then, “*Fine.*”

Tristan let out a whoop of happiness, and Laila couldn’t help but smile. Tristan could get away with anything with those wide, gray eyes.

“Oh! I came up with a new device. I wanted to show Séverin. Where is he?”

When he caught sight of her face, Tristan’s grin fell. “They’re not back yet?”

“*Yet,*” emphasized Laila. “Don’t worry. You know these things take time. Why don’t you come inside? I’ll make you something to eat.”

Tristan shook his head. “Maybe later. I have to check on Goliath. I don’t think he’s feeling well.”

Laila did not ask how Tristan would know the emotional states of a tarantula. Instead, she took her gift and headed back inside the hotel. As she walked, unease shaded her thoughts. At the top of the stairs, the grandfather clock struck the tenth hour. Laila felt the lost hour like an ache in her bones. They should have been back by now.

Something was wrong.

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