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THE QUEEN'S ASSASSIN

MELISSA DE LA CRUZ

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G. P. PUTNAM'S SONS

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For Mike and Mattie, always

THE
QUEEN'S
ASSASSIN

EXCERPT FROM THE SCROLL OF OMIN, 1.2:

A Comprehensive History of Avantine

LONG AGO, WHEN ALL THE kingdoms of Avantine were united as one under the great goddess Deia, and the mighty Dellafore dynasty ruled over the land, there lived a terrible man named Phras.

Though he had some measure of wealth in his own right, Phras was deeply envious of his cousin, the king, who came from the Dellafore bloodline on his mother's side and had much stronger magical ability. This envy ate at Phras's heart and mind until one day it consumed him entirely, and he murdered the king, taking the crown for himself.

Once in power, he erased all records of the Dellafores so that in the future, the history of Avantine would begin with him, King Phras I.

But instead of winning the people's hearts, he became known as the Tyrant King, for he was a cruel man, paranoid and consumed by the desire to keep magical power to himself.

With promises of riches and power beyond their ken, the Tyrant King amassed a great and powerful army, which he sent out into the land to collect every scrap of the mystical, sacred texts they could find—from recipes for potions and poultices to spell books and arcane tomes filled with dark magic and demonology. A council of his most loyal followers

compiled a single document from them. These became known as the Deian Scrolls, the fount of all magical history, information, practice, and use.

No one in the kingdom was allowed access to the scrolls save for the group who had put them together, who called themselves Aphrasians, after their king. Through their efforts, King Phras learned the secrets of the darkest magic in the universe, and ruled as king and sorcerer. The Aphrasian order served as his magical soldiers and were given the castle of Baer to use as they wished. It was there that they founded their abbey.

Meanwhile, magic was decreed forbidden to the common folk, especially for the wise women, who were considered a great threat to the king and his men.

Brave witches saved as much magic as they could, which they passed on secretly. Thus the Hearthstone Guild was formed. In the early days, the Guild was simply an underground organization dedicated to preserving common and household magic; only later did it become a society of assassins and spies.

The surviving Dellafores went into hiding. Extinct, it was said. The bloodline had died out. They were forgotten, as were the myths about mages and demons.

Over the course of his three-hundred-year rule, numerous revolts broke out against the Tyrant King, and in the wake of the tumult of his death, Avantine fractured into different kingdoms, all vying for power: Renovia to the west; Montrice to the north; Argonia to the south; Stavvin to the east.

Baer Abbey lay to the west, and thus the Aphrasian monks fell under Renovia's rule. While they were subject to their king or queen, over time their power grew so great that their leaders began to disregard the monarch and act on their own accord; after all, many of them were

high-ranking aristocrats themselves. The Aphrasians believed they were subservient to no one, collecting tithes and levying taxes as they pleased. There were rumors that they kept Renovia locked in an endless cycle of wars with its neighbors, selling magic to the highest bidder and fanning hostilities while feigning loyalty to the crown.

Thus did the Aphrasian monks maintain control of the Deian Scrolls for centuries, doling out wisdom in bits and pieces as they saw fit, forcing commoners to consult them for all sorts of spiritual and physical ailments, wearing a mask of obedience before royalty as they pulled the strings of the puppet monarchs.

That is until the Tyrant King's descendant, King Esban, toured his lands and saw the effect that lifetimes of high taxes and spiritual oppression had on his people. He decided enough was enough—magic and knowledge belonged to all. He vowed to end the Aphrasians' reign of terror once and for all.

So rather than follow in his forefathers' footsteps, King Esban chose to follow the peace treaty and not to attack Montrice in retaliation for their anger at his Montrician bride, as his advisors counseled. Instead, he declared war on the Aphrasians and descended upon Baer Abbey. After a lengthy battle, the king's army prevailed, but did so at great cost. In an act of selfless bravery, King Esban gave his life for his kingdom.

Despite his sacrifice, the Deian Scrolls were not found. They disappeared along with the tattered remnants of the Aphrasian order.

King Esban's widow, Queen Lilianna, has been searching for the Scrolls ever since. They are the only remaining collection of Deian magic, aside from knowledge that was passed down from the Guild, and from grandmother to mother to daughter.

However, the Guild's knowledge is just a fraction of the magic contained in the scrolls, and without them, the Queen, and the Kingdom,

of Renovia remain vulnerable to threats lurking outside the country's borders, as well as those within.

But the queen thinks only of her country. She will stop at nothing to find the scrolls, for they are the key to her family's protection . . . and her country's salvation.



PROLOGUE

Renovia

IN THE TIME OF KING ESBAN
AFTER THE BATTLE OF BAER

“THE KING IS DEAD! LONG LIVE THE QUEEN!”

A frail elder from the village of Nhainne began the chant from where she stood, hunched at the back of the crowd, her left hand grasping a worn walking stick. She raised her free hand to point one crooked finger toward the palace and shouted again, louder this time, voice scratchy and breaking from the effort: “The king is dead! Long live the queen!” At first the others gathered were afraid to speak of the sovereign’s death prematurely, as to do so had been a treasonous offense under former monarchs, but the old woman had weathered too many seasons to fear the truth. She lifted her stick and brought it down with a bang as she said it once more, with all the breath she could muster: “The king is dead! Long live the queen!”

A small child joined next, and the crone’s words began to spread the way wind gains force in a storm. Faintly and then all at once, until all the people around her were shouting: “The king is dead! Long live the queen!”

It became a demand. The people of Renovia wanted answers.

Villagers had flocked to meet the Renovian army—what was left of it, at least—as they dragged themselves on the dirt roads toward home the evening prior, ragged and barefoot, shoulders slumped despite their success, often with a fellow soldier in even worse shape hanging on beside them. The soldiers confirmed that, yes, their beloved king, who fought by their side in battle against the Aphrasian monks, had indeed been killed.

And so Renovians began to gather at the perimeter of Viola Ruza soon after daybreak, a scattered few at first, then more and more, waiting for an announcement. But the sun was already high in the sky and still they heard nothing. Surely, the palace would issue an official statement, as was tradition when a monarch passed, or at least some indication that the rumors were true—and that the kingdom was secure. A Montrician invasion was a Renovian's greatest fear, although an attack from Stavin or Argonia was not incomprehensible. Peace treaties were often broken.

But their hopes were met with silence. The white stone palace and its jagged turrets loomed over them, still and eerie, and the royal banner of Renovia flew high over the tallest spire long after the sun dipped behind the building and below the horizon. It was never lowered. Nobody knew quite what to make of this—was King Esban actually alive, or was his queen simply unable to accept his death? Or worse—had the Aphrasians seized the crown?

The next dawn arrived and there was still no word. Yet news of the king's demise and the Aphrasians' defeat continued to travel from town to town, swelling the crowds gathered around the palace. The hordes began at the grand iron gates and overflowed into the

surrounding fields as the mourners grew by dozens, then hundreds. Some rode in on horseback or on bumpy harvest wagons filled with family and neighbors. Others arrived on foot. They tied scraps of white and purple cloth to the castle gates and carried baskets of freshly cut flowers from their gardens—lilies for the queen and lilacs for the infant princess—which they arranged in bunches along the edge of the grounds. Their king's sacrifice had given them the dream of a better future, free of the Aphrasian order; all their hope now lies with the regent queen and his heir.

The mood was strangely festive, if solemn. Everyone arrived in their best hats and dress for the occasion, so there were bursts of blues and reds and yellows amid the traditional funereal white. They looked less like mourners than a rich garden in full bloom. Old friends were reunited; children ran between their parents' legs, chasing one another around in circles. After all, it was rare for so many from so far to gather together, and they had the longed-for defeat of the treacherous Aphrasians to celebrate even though victory had come at a great cost.

Still the survivors reveled in recounting King Esban's valiant final moments for the crowd, all swearing they'd witnessed it with their very own eyes: how after taking on an entire company of men by himself, their great king was cut straight through with a longsword, at the top of a knoll, a magnificent sunset ushering him into the next world. And how, within seconds of the king's death, the Aphrasian monk who felled him had met his own end, thanks to Grand Prince Alast, the king's younger brother, who lunged toward the monk, his blade shining in the setting sun, slicing through the traitor's neck.

When the last of the Aphrasians retreated, fleeing into the

woods surrounding the abbey, the strongest of the king's remaining soldiers gathered their fallen, including the king himself, onto makeshift wagon beds and hitched them to the few horses they could find.

A parade of the departed, led by their slain king, was en route to the capital city's catacombs. All those they passed could see King Esban was well and truly dead.

Yet the palace remained silent . . .

On the fourth day after the Battle of Baer, late in the afternoon, Queen Lilianna finally pulled the edge of the curtain aside from one of the high arched windows in her private quarters. Ever since the news reached her of her husband's death, her place of refuge had become more like a tomb, lit only by a single candle. Even the jangle of the metal curtain rings was jarring. Her head throbbed. Sun spilled into the hushed room, casting a stream of light across the marble floor. The queen flinched, squinting until her eyes adjusted to the bright light, then peeked out at the agitated crowd congregating below. Her gaze settled on a cluster of men near the gate. One of them was shouting. Those surrounding him nodded along in agreement. He gestured wildly toward the castle, punctuating his words with flailing arms and pointed fingers.

"I need to speak to my people, Holt," the queen said. "Assure them that I am their true queen, even if I am not from Renovia."

She'd hardly slept since her husband led his army for Baer Abbey to quash the Aphrasian uprising. Nor had she left her lavish rooms. This was precisely what she'd feared when he set out. She'd implored him not to go, but Esban insisted the men needed their

king. It was his duty. He was, above all else, a man of honor, a leader in the truest sense. But now he was gone, and she was left behind to pick up the pieces.

Still, despite private grief and public turmoil, Queen Lilianna managed to remain as poised as always. Her ebony hair remained perfectly wrapped in a high braided bun, and her deep purple satin dressing gown flowed effortlessly from her shoulders to her slippered feet. Only her face betrayed her fatigue: usually traced in smoky kohl, her eyes were bare and swollen from crying; her deep brown skin was wan and dull. Silver trays of food sat untouched on her tea table. She'd only nibbled at the corner of a single slice of bread the night before in order to appease her counselors before banishing them from the room.

All except one. Known commonly as the King's Assassin, Cordyn Holt was the crown's personal advisor and commander of Renovia's security forces—as well as the king's dearest and most trusted friend. As such, he'd been tasked with guarding Queen Lilianna while King Esban was away. Holt was the only person the queen had allowed in her presence since news of Esban's death was delivered by Grand Prince Alast on the evening of the battle.

The moment Alast left, Holt had positioned his imposing frame near the room's double door, where he intended to stay as long as his queen needed him.

"Holt, I must speak to them," she pressed.

"Too dangerous," he said, hands clasped behind his back, strong chin lifted high with authority. "If you step out onto the balcony, you will be exposed. We don't know who's out there."

Eyes wide, she turned to him. "You told me those wretched rebels had been purged. That the Aphrasians were finished."

For the most part, he thought. He kept his expression as neutral as he could. “Yes,” he said carefully. “But there are almost certainly sympathizers remaining. There always are.”

She snapped the curtain shut, drowning the room in darkness again. “Then my husband died for nothing?”

Holt sighed, shifted his feet. In a rare moment of weakness, his confidence faltered a bit. “It was not for nothing. The loss we have suffered is a great one. But the realm is secure, at least for now. There is still a kingdom left to inherit. That is far from nothing.”

She stepped away from the window. “And what of the rest? Where are the scrolls? Were they recovered?”

He stammered. “We don’t—unfortunately, no, Your Majesty, we don’t have them.” He kept his hands behind his back and his eyes on the ground to avoid agitating her any further. “Yet,” he added.

“What do you mean you don’t have them?” she shouted. Holt clenched his square jaw. He reminded himself that she was still recovering from a complicated delivery just a few weeks earlier.

“Without the scrolls these monks aren’t ‘purged.’ They’ve only been set back!” She began pacing the plush cream rug, violet waves of fabric fluttering around her. “They’ll keep coming for me. They’re relentless. As long as I’m alive, I’m in their way. Am I to be a prisoner here forever? What use is living in a kingdom of fear, under constant threat?” Holt had never seen her so out of sorts. He was unsure whether she was even speaking directly to him anymore. “They’ve already attempted to kill me once. That we know of! And there are rumors of other plots . . . They’ll never stop coming. Never. How long until they get to the baby?” She stopped pacing to stare at him, as if she expected an answer. He didn’t have one to give her.

Just then, an urgent wail erupted from a canopied cradle near the

queen's chaise. She hurried over and lifted the baby to her breast, shushing her softly. Without turning back to face Holt, she said, "He will never know his child."

"I'm sorry, Your Majesty." He paused, then added, "I understand."

At that she looked at him, clear-eyed, focused, almost as if a spell had broken. "Of course you do," she said, softening her tone. She walked back to the window and drew back a corner of the drape to peek out at the crowd, still cradling the baby. An ivory silk receiving blanket trailed over her shoulder and down her back. "What shall we do now?" she asked him quietly.

He didn't respond right away. What could he say? There were never guarantees, especially not in time of war, and the rebels had been relentless in their pursuit of the royal family, determined to eliminate the rulers as well as any possible heirs. Holt could offer only to do his best to protect her and the child. And his best—a plan he'd been mulling over since the assassination attempt early in the queen's pregnancy—was something she probably would not want to consider just yet. If ever.

They stood in uncomfortable silence for a few seconds; Holt considered the situation. The Renovian army had returned victorious, but weak. They'd sustained a great many casualties. Their king was dead. Several key Aphrasian leaders had been killed, but the survivors had fled, no doubt taking refuge with supporters, most likely in another kingdom. But which one? Stavin? Argonia? Montrice?

Worse, they'd taken the Deian Scrolls—and all the ancient magical wisdom they contained—along with them.

The queen took a deep breath. She stepped over to the window and glanced out behind the curtain again. In the distance, she spied a merchant selling white mourning ribbons from his cart. People

were tying them to sticks and waving them in the air, a traditional symbol of both sorrow and hope, meant to help lead the departed souls home.

“If I cannot address my subjects directly, then you will make the announcement in my stead. The king is dead. We must move forward,” she said. Then added, “Whatever that means now.”

Holt bowed slightly, relieved. “Of course, Your Majesty.” If the queen was finally willing to accept the kingdom’s new, precarious situation, this might be his best opportunity to broach the issue they had been arguing about since first declaring war on the monks. He considered his next words carefully before making his case.

As Holt outlined the shape of his plan, the arrangements he had made, and precautions he’d already taken, the queen’s visage hardened to match her steely gaze. She didn’t like any of it, of course. But she recognized she had few alternatives now, and little time to waste deliberating.

Queen Lilianna turned her head toward the window, though she couldn’t see out from where she sat. Nevertheless, they could still hear the crowd’s chants growing louder from below: “The king is dead! Long live the queen!”

At last she spoke. “Yes. I will agree to the arrangement,” she said. She looked at Holt just as the shock of her words flickered across his face. He knew his plan was a risky one and had expected more resistance from her.

The queen held up her finger. “One caveat,” she added, emphasizing every word. “I will agree . . . but only by blood vow.”

His face fell. Of course, she *would* want more than promises and words. While he was duty-bound to protect her, he had dreaded such a demand. But some part of him knew it would come to this,

and his position and loyalty meant he had no choice in the matter. His only concern was safeguarding the kingdom's future. And so he nodded his assent, though doing so sealed his own fate. The vow meant there would be no possibility of escape—not until it was fulfilled, anyway—and a painful sacrifice on his part as well.

After all, magic always requires balance. An eye for an eye—or a son for a daughter.

The queen laid the sleeping infant, tightly bundled so that all Holt could see of her was a bit of golden skin and brown hair, back in her cradle. Then she strode across the room to the table near him and picked up an opaque bottle. She poured a bit of pink wine from the bottle into a heavy crystal goblet, set it down, and raised a golden knife.

Her eyes fixed on Holt, she began chanting: "*Sanguinem reddetur votum. Sanguinem reddetur votum.*" The mantra grew louder and faster as she pressed the small dagger across her wrist, drawing a line of blood. As it spread down her arm, Holt saw that it wasn't red—it was deep blackish blue, like the midnight sky during a full moon. He tried to hide his surprise at the color, but he couldn't stop himself from staring. She did the same to her other wrist, still repeating the words: "*Sanguinem reddetur votum.*"

When she was done, Queen Lilianna closed her eyes and held her hands low over the wine goblet, palms lifted up toward the sky as her royal blood pooled in them, threatening to drip between her fingers. Then she turned them over the goblet, allowing her blood to spill into the wine, creating plum-colored swirls that spun as she chanted, "*Sanguinem reddetur votum. Sanguinem reddetur votum. Sanguinem reddetur votum.*"

Kneeling, Holt offered his open palms to Queen Lilianna,

closing his eyes as an image of a motherless one-year-old boy came to mind.

The queen took his rough hands in hers, pressing her thumbs to his wrists to feel the beat of his blood coursing through his veins. The skin on the queen's wrist had already smoothed over, as if it had never been cut at all. "Say the words after me," she ordered. "I, Cordyn Holt . . ."

"I, Cordyn Holt, Guardian of Renovia, devoted servant to the House of Dellafiore," he repeated as she continued, "hereby pledge my life—and that of my heirs—to this promise: Defend the crown and restore the sacred scrolls of Deia to their rightful purpose."

"Is this your vow?" Queen Lilianna asked.

"This is my vow," Holt said.

"Until it is done?" she asked.

He paused. Then nodded. "Until it is done." Holt felt slightly ill as the declaration left his lips, almost as if the words had been removed from him by an unseen hand rather than given freely, a punch in the chest almost—but before he could grasp it, it was gone.

The queen released his hands and handed him the goblet. He accepted it, willing himself not to hesitate, and drank of her royal blood.

With that, he was bound. As was his son.

I



Eighteen Years Later



CHAPTER ONE

Shadow

SOMETHING OR SOMEONE IS FOLLOWING me. I've been wandering the woods for quite a while, but now it feels as if something—or someone—is watching. I thought it was one of my aunts at first—it was odd they didn't chase after me this time. Maybe they didn't expect me to go very far. But it's not them.

I stop and pull my hood back to listen to the forest around me. There is only the wind whistling through the branches and the sound of my own breathing.

Whoever is following me is very good at hiding. But I am not afraid.

Slivers of light penetrate the dense foliage in spots, shining streaks onto the blanket of decaying leaves and mud under my boots. As I slice through thick vines and clamber over rotting logs, speckled thrushes take flight from the forest floor before disappearing overhead. I pause to listen to them sing to one another, chirping elegant messages back and forth, a beautiful song carrying warnings, no doubt, about the stranger stomping through their home.

Being out here helps me clear my head. I feel more peaceful

here among the wild creatures, closer to my true self. After this morning's argument at home, it's precisely what I need—some peace. Some space. Time to myself.

My aunts taught me that sometimes when the world is too much, when life starts to feel overwhelming, we must strip away what's unnecessary, seek out the quiet, and listen to the dirt and trees. "All the answers you seek are there, but only if you are willing to hear them," Aunt Moriah always says.

That's all I'm doing, I tell myself. Following their advice. Perhaps that's why they allowed me to run off into the woods. Except they're probably hoping I'll find *their* answers here, not my own. That I'll finally come to my senses.

Anger bubbles up inside me. All I have ever wanted is to follow in their footsteps and join the ranks of the Hearthstone Guild. It's the one thing I've wanted more than anything. We don't just sell honey in the market. They've practically been training me for the guild all my life—how can they deny me? I kick the nearest tree as hard as I can, slamming the sole of my boot into its solid trunk. That doesn't make me feel much better, though, and I freeze, wondering if whatever or whomever is following me has heard.

I know it is a dangerous path, but what nobler task is there than to continue the Guild's quest? To recover the Deian Scrolls and exact revenge upon our enemies. They can't expect me to sit by and watch as others take on the challenge.

All the women I look up to—Ma, my aunt Moriah, and Moriah's wife, my aunt Mesha—belong to the Guild; they are trained combatants and wise women. They are devotees of Deia, the One Mother, source of everything in the world of Avantine, from the clouds overhead to the dirt underfoot. Deia worship was

common once but not anymore, and those who keep to its beliefs have the Guild to thank for preserving the old ways. Otherwise that knowledge would have disappeared long ago when the Aphrasians confiscated it from the people. The other kingdoms no longer keep to the old ways, even as they conspire to learn our magic.

As wise women they know how to tap into the world around us, to harness the energy that people have long forgotten but other creatures have not. My mother and aunts taught me how to access the deepest levels of my instincts, the way that animals do, to sense danger and smell fear. To become deeply in tune with the universal language of nature that exists just below the surface of human perception, the parts we have been conditioned not to hear anymore.

While I call them my aunts, they are not truly related to me, even if Aunt Moriah and my mother grew up as close as sisters. I was fostered here because my mother's work at the palace is so important that it leaves little time for raising a child.

A gray squirrel runs across my path and halfway up a nearby tree. It stops and looks at me quizzically. "It's all right," I say. "I'm not going to hurt you." It waits until I start moving again and scampers the rest of the way up the trunk.

The last time I saw my mother, I told her of my plans to join the Guild. I thought she'd be proud of me. But she'd stiffened and paused before saying, "There are other ways to serve the crown."

Naturally, I'd have preferred her to be with me, every day, like other mothers, but I've never lacked for love or affection. My aunts had been there for every bedtime tale and scraped knee, and Ma served as a glamorous and heroic figure for a young woman to look up to. She would swoop into my life, almost always under cover of

darkness, cloaked and carrying gifts, like the lovely pair of brocade satin dance slippers I'll never forget. They were as ill-suited for rural life as a pair of shoes could possibly be, and I treasured them for it. "The best cobbler in Argonia's capital made these," she told me. I marveled at that, how far they'd traveled before landing on my feet.

Yes, I liked the presents well enough. But what made me even happier were the times she stayed long enough to tell me stories. She would sit on the edge of my bed, tuck my worn quilt snugly around me, and tell me tales of Avantine, of the old kingdom.

Our people are fighters, she'd say. *Always were*. I took that to mean I would be one too.

I think about these stories as I whack my way through the brush. Why would my mother tell me tales of heroism, adventure, bravery, and sacrifice, unless I was to train with the Guild as well? As a child, I was taught all the basics—survival and tracking skills, and then as I grew, I began combat training and archery.

I do know more of the old ways than most, and I'm grateful for that, but it isn't enough. I want to know as much as they do, or even more. I need to belong to the Guild.

Now I fear I never will have that chance.

"Ouch!" I flinch and pull my hand back from the leaves surrounding me. There's a thin sliver of blood seeping out of my skin. I was so lost in my thoughts that I accidentally cut my hand while hacking through shrubbery. The woods are unfamiliar here, wilder and denser. I've never gone out this far. The path ahead is so overgrown it's hard to believe there was ever anyone here before me, let alone a procession of messengers and traders and visitors traveling between Renovia and the other kingdoms of Avantine. But that was

before. Any remnants of its prior purpose are disappearing quickly. Even my blade, crafted from Argonian steel—another present from Ma—struggles to sever some of the more stubborn branches that have reclaimed the road for the wilderness.

I try to quiet my mind and concentrate on my surroundings. Am I lost? Is something following me? “What do I do now?” I say out loud. Then I remember Aunt Mesha’s advice: *Be willing to hear.*

I breathe, focus. Re-center. *Should I turn back?* The answer is so strong, it’s practically a physical shove: *No. Continue.* I suppose I’ll push through, then. Maybe I’ll discover a forgotten treasure along this path.

Woodland creatures watch me, silently, from afar. They’re perched in branches and nestled safely in burrows. Sometimes I catch a whiff of newborn fur, of milk; I smell the fear of anxious mothers protecting litters; I feel their heartbeats, their quickened breaths when I pass. I do my best to calm them by closing my eyes and sending them benevolent energy. *Just passing through. I’m no threat to you.*

After about an hour of bushwhacking I realize that I don’t know where I am anymore. The trees look different, older. I hear the trickling of water. Unlike before, there are signs that something, or rather someone, was here not long before me. Cracked sticks have been stepped on—by who or what I’m not sure—and branches are too neatly chopped to have been broken naturally. I want to investigate, see if I can feel how long ago they were cut. Maybe days; maybe weeks. Difficult to tell.

I stop to examine the trampled foliage just as I feel an abrupt change in the air.

There it is again. Whoever or whatever it is smells foul, rotten. I shudder. I keep going, hoping to shake it off my trail.

I walk deeper into the forest and pause under a canopy of trees. A breeze blows against a large form in the branches overhead. I sense the weight of its bulk, making the air above me feel heavier, oppressive. It pads quietly. A huge predator. Not human. It's been biding its time. But now it's tense, ready to strike.

The tree becomes very still. And everything around does the same. I glance to my right and see a spider hanging in the air, frozen, just like I am.

Leaves rustle, like the fanning pages of a book. Snarling heat of its body getting closer, closer, inch by inch. I can smell its hot breath. Feel its mass as it begins to bear down on me from above. Closer, closer, until at last it launches itself from its hiding place. I feel its energy, aimed straight at me. Intending to kill, to devour.

But I am ready.

Just as it attacks, I kick ferociously at its chest, sending it flying. It slams to the ground, knocked out cold. A flock of starlings erupts from their nest in the treetops, chirping furiously.

My would-be killer is a sleek black scimitar-toothed jaguar. The rest of the wildlife stills, shocked into silence, at my besting the king of the forest.

I roll back to standing, then hear something else, like shifting or scratching, in the distance. As careful as I've been, I've managed to cause a commotion and alert every creature in the forest of my presence.

I crouch behind a wide tree. After waiting a breath or two, I don't sense any other unusual movement nearby. Perhaps I was wrong about the noise. Or simply heard a falling branch or a startled animal running for cover.

There's no reason to remain where I am, and I'm not going back

now, in case the jaguar wakes, so I get up and make my way forward again. It looks like there's a clearing ahead.

My stomach lurches. After everything—the argument and my big show of defiance—I am gripped with the unexpected desire to return home. I don't know if the cat's attack has rattled me—it shouldn't have, I've been in similar situations before—but a deep foreboding comes over me.

Yet just as strongly, I feel the need to keep going, beyond the edge of the forest, as if something is pulling me forward. I move faster, fumbling a bit over some debris.

Finally, I step through the soft leafy ground around a few ancient trees, their bark slick with moss, and push aside a branch filled with tiny light-green leaves.

When I emerge from the woods, I discover I was wrong. It's not just a clearing; I've stumbled upon the golden ruins of an old building. A fortress. The tight feeling in my chest intensifies. I should turn back. There's danger here. Or at least there *was* danger here—it appears to be long abandoned.

The building's intimidating skeletal remains soar toward the clouds, but it's marred by black soot; it's been scorched by a fire—or maybe more than one. Most of the windows are cracked or else missing completely. Rosebushes are overgrown with burly thistle weeds, and clumps of dead brown shrubbery dot the property. Vines climb up one side of the structure and crawl into the empty windows.

Above the frame of one of those windows, I spot a weathered crest, barely visible against the stone. I step closer. There are two initials overlapping each other in an intricate design: *ba*. In an instant I know exactly where I am.

Baer Abbey.

I inhale sharply. How did I walk so far? How long have I been gone?

This place is forbidden. Dangerous. Yet I was drawn here. Is this a sign, the message I was searching for? And if so, what it is trying to tell me?

Despite the danger, I've always wanted to see the abbey, home of the feared and powerful Aphrasians. I try picturing it as it was long ago, glistening in the blinding midday heat, humming with activity, the steady bustle of cloaked men and women going about their daily routines. I imagine one of them meditating underneath the massive oak to the west; another reading on the carved limestone bench in the now-decrepit gardens.

I walk around the exterior, looking for the place where King Esban charged into battle with his soldiers.

I hear something shift again. It's coming from inside the abbey walls. As if a heavy object is being pushed or dragged—opening a door? Hoisting something with a pulley? I approach the building and melt into its shadow, like the pet name my mother gave me.

But who could be here? A generation of looters has already stripped anything of value, though the lure of undiscovered treasure might still entice adventurous types. And drifters. Or maybe there's a hunter, or a hermit who's made his home close to this desolate place.

In the distance, the river water slaps against the rocky shore, and I can hear the rustling of leaves and the trilling of birds. All is as it should be, and yet. Something nags at me, like a faraway ringing in my ear. Someone or something is still following me, and it's not the jaguar. It smells of death and rot.

I move forward anyway, deciding to run the rest of the way along

the wall to an entryway, its door long gone. I just want to peek inside—I may never have this chance again.

I slide around the corner of the wall and enter the abbey's interior. Most of the roof is demolished, so there's plenty of light, even this close to dusk. Tiny specks of dust float in the air. There's a veneer of grime on every surface, and wet mud in shaded spots. I step forward, leaving footprints behind me. I glance at the rest of the floor—no other prints. Nobody has been here recently, at least not since the last rain.

I move as lightly as possible. Then I hear something different. I stop, step backward. There it is again. I step forward—solid. Back—yes, an echo. Like a well. There's something hollow below. Storage? A crypt?

I should turn back. Nothing good can come from being here, and I know it. The abbey is Aphrasian territory, no matter how long ago they vacated. And yet. There's no reason to believe anyone is here, and who knows what I might find if I just dig a bit. Perhaps a treasure was hidden here. Maybe even the Deian Scrolls.

I step on a large square tile, made of heavy charcoal slate, which is stubbornly embedded in the ground. I clear the dirt around it as much as I can and get my fingertips under its lip. With effort, I heave the tile up enough to hoist it over to the side. Centipedes scurry away into the black hole below. I use the heel of my boot to shove the stone the rest of the way, revealing a wooden ladder underneath.

I press on it carefully, testing its strength, then make my way down. At the last rung I jump down and turn to find a long narrow passageway lined with empty sconces. It smells of mildew, dank and damp. I follow the tunnel, my footsteps echoing around me.

I hear water lapping gently against stone up ahead. Could there be an underground stream? The passage continues on, dark and quiet aside from the occasional drip of water from the ceiling.

At the end of the corridor a curved doorway opens into a large cavern. As I suspected, an underground river flows by. A small hole in the ceiling allows light in, revealing sharp stalactites that hang down everywhere, glittering with the river's reflection. The room is aglow in yellows and oranges and reds, and it feels like standing in the middle of fire. This space was definitely not made by human hands; instead, the tunnel, the abbey, was built up around it. There's a loading dock installed for small boats, though none are there anymore.

Then I see something that makes my heart catch. I gasp.

The Aphrasians have been missing for eighteen years and yet there's a fresh apple core tossed aside near the doorway.

That's when I hear men's voices approaching from the corridor behind me.



CHAPTER TWO

Shadow

“WHO’S THERE?” A GRUFF VOICE calls out from within the tunnel. It echoes: *Who’s there? Who’s there? Who’s there?*

Frantically, I search for somewhere *to hide. They heard me!* But the tunnel appears to be the sole way out and I can’t go back the way I came. There’s only the river below. The voices whisper to one another from inside the tunnel as I slide off the edge of the dock and into the water, trying not to make a splash. I hear clanging as the men run toward the stream, their boots shuffling on the ground as they turn around looking for whoever was there.

“Got away,” one says. His voice is deep, gravelly. It’s the same man who called out before.

“Could be you’re hearin’ things again,” says the other. Higher-pitched, scratchy. Younger than the first, I think.

“Is that so? Then who moved the stone?” the first replies. “More like they jumped in the river.”

The second scoffs. “Then they’re dead for sure.”

His words are prescient as the flow of the river drags me along, turns a corner, and slopes down, the current picking up speed. I

try to retain control but the water swallows me. I struggle to push myself above the surface and gasp for air. *They were right, I won't make it.* The undertow is too strong.

I kick as hard as I can, barely keeping my head out of the river, which is splashing against my face and into my nose and mouth. I can't keep the water out and also let air in. *Don't panic*, I tell myself. *Never panic.*

I spot a heavy branch sticking out of the water. I reach for it and fail, falling back into the current. I should never have come here. I'm going to drown. *I'm going to die.*

Also: My aunts are going to kill me.

No, no! I absolutely refuse to give up! My arms and legs shove me on as if being controlled by an outside force. I manage to propel my body toward another floating branch and grab on to it.

Water washes over my head again. I keep my eyes closed and hang on to the branch with all my might. When my head emerges, I try to suck in air but immediately begin coughing. Wheezing. There's water in my lungs. My nose and throat are burning. The men at the abbey can probably hear me splashing now but I hardly care. I just want to make it out of here alive.

There's a light ahead. The mouth of the cave. I hear banging noises from behind me, where the men were at the shoreline. It sounds like some kind of battle, as if the men I'd heard back there were suddenly attacked. My breathing is returning to normal, though I still feel the sting in my nose and chest. If I hadn't come across the branch . . . or if my leg had caught on one under the surface . . .

I emerge with the river. I look around and see I'm on the other side of the abbey now. Right near the hill I saw in the distance

earlier—the site of the great battle. I feel the oppressive weight of death all around me, even within the earth itself.

The branch runs up against some rocks near the shoreline, beneath an ancient weeping willow. My arms are weak. Shaking. I have to get out of the water. I can take refuge in the tree. Its full, low-hanging branches are spread out around its wide, trunk-like curtains. A good place to hang on, stay concealed.

Please just this one thing, I beg myself. *Get out of the water*. Gritting my teeth, I lift my upper body until I'm lying across the top of a stone. A horse whinnies from beyond the hill; a man shouts. Another man grunts again and again, as if he's punching someone. I rest a moment to catch my breath and listen to the brawl beyond the hill. The men are still struggling against some interloper, but it means they're not coming any nearer to me, so I swing my right leg up onto the rock and hoist myself out. The heavy boots I'm wearing definitely weren't helping me in the water.

The sounds of struggle subside abruptly, as if someone's won. Dripping wet, I crawl over to the willow and hide beneath its curtain of leaves. It's quiet now. They may have left—or killed one another. Either way, not my concern.

The sun is already setting; one of my aunts would definitely have started looking for me by now.

There hasn't been any other sound from beyond the hill for some time now. I don't like it here. Unlike the ruins, this place bears the stain of death. Violence. Its energy is an invisible fog. I place my palm against the willow's sturdy trunk to brace myself so I can stand.

A powerful shock surges straight through me.

Suddenly, I can see a soldier wearing the Renovian colors, bleeding out into the earth. Another soldier with a missing arm, leg

snapped upward into a terrifying pose, is groaning. *I want to go home*, he cries. *I want to go*.

One man is almost fully submerged in the river, only his legs sticking out. And countless others are strewn about in the same condition, or worse. Everywhere. The dead. This is the Battle of Baer, playing out before my eyes. I can smell the stench in the air and hear the death groans, but it isn't real, I'm not there; this is just an illusion, a place memory. One so powerful that those with the sight can see it if they try. Even if they don't try. Aunt Moriah said sometimes such visions find the seeker, rather than the other way around.

I have been seeing visions since I was ten years old.

Then I look up. And there he is. King Esban.

I recognize him from his chiseled profile on Renovian coins. A striking figure, like the fabled shipbuilders of the north countries: tall, broad shouldered, bearded, golden hair flowing from under a dented silver helmet. Noble and brave, just as the stories say, but with kind eyes. They never mention that.

I feel the urge to go to him but I can't move. I know what's about to happen, and I want to call to him, to warn him. But when I try to yell, nothing comes out.

A man charges toward him, sword raised above his head. He's wearing a gray Aphrasian robe and their unmistakable black mask. The king is steady. Metal meets metal with a clang. They struggle, the rebel monk pushing the king back; the king shoves him off with equal force. The monk aims his right leg directly at the king's stomach, but Esban steps away so the kick lands off its mark, barely grazing his hip. He stretches his arm back and swings the sword at the rebel with all his might. The monk dodges the strike. The king

is furiously red, chest heaving, teeth bared. He lunges at the monk again.

They go on like this. It seems that neither can win. The other soldiers haven't even noticed the skirmish on the mound yet. I try to scream, *Help him!* But I can't, because as real as it seems, I'm only watching. Witnessing the past.

I look back up.

The rebel is on the ground. The king walks over him and lifts his sword. For a brief moment I hope King Esban will win this time. That the past can change. But the monk rolls and swipes the king's leg out from under him. He stumbles, falls. He's about to get up when it happens.

The monk drives his sword straight through King Esban's chest.

I yank my hand away from the willow. I start gagging, retching. I haven't eaten all day, so all I bring up is bile. Tears are streaming down my face. This is what my aunts meant when they told me to *be careful for what you wish*. For the answer might not be the one you seek. I wanted danger and adventure as a Guild apprentice, and alas, I seem to have found it.

I stand to leave. Based on where the sun hangs in the sky, I've a little time left until complete darkness. I'll dry off as I go, as long as I'm moving. Good thing it's still warm at night. I won't freeze to death, at least.

I walk away, just as something slams into me. I'm knocked straight onto my back, totally winded. For a frenzied second I expect to see the jaguar again—but no, there's a man standing over me.

Gray robes. The dreaded black mask of the Aphrasian order covering his face. The mask that's given children nightmares for centuries. The monk raises his sword.

This is no vision.

This is all too real.

This must be who was following me earlier. The smell is the same—of rot and death. I was right, there *was* a predator on my trail, one who is intent on killing me. I am too shocked to move.

I shut my eyes and cross my arms over my face, anticipating the blow.

But someone comes out from nowhere, swooping over me and knocking the assailant away, running a sword through his belly.

I open my eyes. A hooded man stands over my attacker, who he has impaled to the ground.

As he leans over to inspect the dead man's pockets, I catch a glimpse of my savior.

I'd know that face anywhere. It's Caledon Holt.

Scruffy beard over deep olive skin, messy brown hair falling over his eyes. Not much older than me, nineteen, and already the Queen's Assassin. The Guild's golden child. No other commoner in Renovia knows who he is, or exactly what he does, but my mother and aunts are part of the Guild, so they know, and I know what they know.

I dash away while he searches the monk. I don't know what he's doing here. I don't understand what just happened. But I do not want him to see me; he could remember who I am and drag me back to my aunts, telling them where I'd gone. That I was nearly killed. My mother will hear of it and I will never be allowed to leave the house again.

So I hide, even though I doubt he'd recognize me. I'd only met him at his father's funeral, but I'm still well aware of who *he* is. My aunts keep close tabs on him. They admired his father, Cordyn, greatly.

I watch him from behind a nearby bush. He turns back to the monk and peels off the mask. The man beneath is golden haired and handsome, with a huge pink scar across his cheek, from when he was attacked years ago while avenging his king.

I gasp. But when Caledon looks up, I've already disappeared into the brush.

The rebel monk who tried to kill me was Alast, the Grand Prince of Renovia, King Esban's younger brother.



CHAPTER THREE

Shadow

I COULDN'T STAY. AS SOON as Caledon unmasked the Grand Prince, a group of the queen's soldiers appeared out of nowhere. When I finally return from Baer long after dark, my mind is awlirl.

As soon as I step onto the gravel walkway by the herb garden, my legs start to give out beneath me. It's tempting to just collapse and sleep outside where I fall. But I make it past the apiary yard, with its rows and rows of beehives, and approach the house. It's dark aside from a pale yellow glow in one window—my aunts' bedroom. They probably did a locus spell to find my location, and have been following my trek home ever since. *Could have sent a horse.* I suppose they think making me walk home is a punishment I deserve.

Even though they probably know I'm home, I still slip inside the back door of the cottage and tiptoe through the kitchen. It's almost the middle of the night.

I climb the stairs to my cozy attic room as quietly as I can, avoiding the seventh stair because it creaks loudly enough to wake a bear from hibernation, and finally flop onto my fluffy bed, managing

to kick off my boots and nothing else. I'll regret it in the morning when I have to wash the dirt out of my bedding, but for now, I care about nothing but lying here undisturbed.

But I can't ignore what happened today. Visions of Caledon and the grand prince flash in my mind. The prince was trying to kill me! And he was wearing an Aphrasian mask. Did that mean he was a traitor to the crown? I owe Caledon a debt of gratitude I could never repay—and yet, I can't tell anyone he saved me! Still, guilt pulls at me—what if Caledon is punished for killing the prince? I have to do something, I have to say something.

The house is unnaturally silent, which means my aunts are listening to my every move. I tense up, waiting to hear their footsteps on the staircase, but they never come.

Finally, I hear them whispering in their bedroom. I try to eavesdrop but I'm too tired to make much of an effort. Besides, the obstruction spell they cast over their room usually keeps me from hearing anything they say in there anyway. I wonder what, if anything, they already know about where I've been, and if they think my return means they've won our earlier argument. That I'm resigned to give up on the Guild.

As exhausted as I am, sleep will not come now. The events of the day repeat in my mind over and over again: Caledon Holt; the Grand Prince Alast; the argument about my future that led me to venturing off toward Baer Abbey in the first place. The mysterious pull toward it, the visions from the willow tree . . . I wish I could tell my aunts about all of it, except then I'd have to explain that I'd been to the abbey and the danger I was in.

Despite the flurry of thoughts crowding my mind, at some point I do drift off, because next thing I know, I'm waking up to the sounds

of roosters crowing and pots banging downstairs. Aunt Mesha is making her morning oatmeal. My stomach growls. I hope we have molasses for it, and not just honey. And fresh cream.

I pull a pillow over my head. I'm not sure if my aunts went to bed at all; I hear their voices drift upstairs. They think I'm still sleeping, though—they're not making much of an effort to cover their words.

I hear Aunt Mesha say, "We can't let her—"

But Aunt Moriah interrupts her. "If she goes anyway, then what would we do? Do you want that?"

"Is it really our responsibility that she—"

"How can you say such a thing? You know that it is!"

I hear a spoon being stirred angrily against a teacup before being slammed down on the table. "It has been quite a few years since we were her age, but if you recall, there's little can be done once a young mind is determined . . . Maybe if . . ." Aunt Mesha's voice trails off.

I roll over and push myself out of bed. My arms and legs ache something awful from the day before. My neck is stiff; my shoulders hurt. I have tiny scratches all over my hands. I'm afraid to check my reflection. I'm sure I look even worse than I feel. And I'm supposed to go into town today to sell honey too.

They're going to ask questions when I go down to the kitchen. I could tell them about the jaguar, I suppose, but not the rest. They'd certainly never believe I *accidentally* found myself at Baer Abbey, and that I was *accidentally* attacked, and that it was pure coincidence that Caledon Holt, who I've so openly admired, happened to be there at precisely the right moment. How can I make them believe it was all by chance? They will most certainly think I tracked Caledon down in an attempt to persuade him to take me

on as a Guild apprentice. There's no other reasonable explanation for my actions.

Avoiding the small mirror on the wall, I peel off my filthy shirt and torn black pants—completely ruined—and attempt to wash up a bit, using what's left of the clean water I brought up the day before. I comb out my long hair as best I can, removing a few twigs and leaves as I do so, and wrap it in a low bun. That feels better. I pull a clean linen shift over my head and step into a soft brown skirt, then lace my leather bodice over it. Presentable enough. I tie on an apron and slide clogs on my feet.

My aunts stop talking when they hear me clunking down the wooden staircase. I hear spoons stirring in cups, and an egg crack, then sizzle as it hits the pan.

"Good morning," I say, coming through the doorway.

Neither returns the greeting. My aunts stare at my face before glancing down at my hands. Then they exchange a look with each other. They don't seem angry. I'm not sure how to read their mood, actually. Worried, for sure. Also frustrated. Perhaps a little sad? They definitely haven't slept much—both are wearing nightclothes and Aunt Moriah's hair is still wrapped up. Aunt Mesha has her usual loose braid hanging down her back, the way she wears her hair day and night.

I go about my morning routine as if nothing has happened, waiting to see if either of them will speak, or if the incident will just blow over and be forgotten. I choose a chipped teacup from the shelf and sprinkle dried herbs inside. My aunts continue to watch me, and I pretend not to notice. I add a generous dose of turmeric to the cup, for the aches. I grab a mitt, pull the kettle off the fire and fill the cup, then replace the kettle.

I begin to wonder if I should wait for the tea to steep here, or if I should take it outside when Aunt Moriah finally says, “We need to talk, child.”

Aunt Mesha springs into action, fussing with canisters, opening and closing them as if looking for something. She settles on the honey jar, begins adding dollop after dollop to her bowl of oatmeal. Her hands are shaking.

I nod before taking a sip of the too-hot, still-watery tea. I don’t want to offer any information or ask any questions that may lead to subjects I don’t have any desire to discuss right now.

“Mesha? Do you want to . . .,” Aunt Moriah begins.

Aunt Mesha slams down the honey spoon. “Oh! Absolutely not, and you know that very well.”

“What is going on?” I ask. Their behavior is starting to alarm me. I can sense this is about more than where I disappeared to yesterday.

“Well . . .,” Aunt Moriah says.

Aunt Mesha bursts into tears. “I just don’t understand how this all happened so fast!”

“Calm down, Mesha. You’re scaring her.”

“Honestly, yes, you both are,” I say. Something terrible occurs to me. Are they marrying me off? Some of the tea splashes from the cup. I put it down on the table and wipe my hand on my skirt.

Mesha wipes her face with her apron. “We received this today, a letter from your mother and orders from the palace. You are to take your place by your mother’s side at court.”

I read my mother’s short note and the official document.

TO MAIDEN SHADOW OF THE HONEY GLADE, NIR,
IN THE KINGDOM OF RENOVIA

*HRM Lilianna, Queen Regent of Renovia,
requires your presence at the court of Viola Ruza*

I wanted my mother to call for me, but not like this. I had told her as much during her last visit. I had told her to send me to the Guild. I know I've been spirited at times, but over the years I've been a compliant daughter, always willing to listen and learn, and this is how I'm treated on the cusp of adulthood—with complete disregard for my own wishes? I am eighteen years old. I am old enough to marry, to have a life of my own.

Then it occurs to me: That is exactly why this is happening now. And I cannot defy orders from the queen.

"We are so proud of you," says Aunt Mesha.

"Your mother is so proud of you," says Aunt Moriah.

I'm sure they think it's a wonderful honor to accompany my mother at court. Every little girl's dream. Except I'm not a little girl. And going to court has never been my dream. I long for dangerous assignments, to be out in the field, to be a spy just as she was when she was my age. But my mother wouldn't know that, because she's always been more concerned with living her life at court than getting to know her only daughter.

"But I don't want to go," I say.

"You're not leaving yet. Your mother says we have a week to prepare," says Aunt Mesha.

Aunt Moriah puts her arms around her wife and turns to me. "Let's not talk about it anymore. Shadow, darling, go outside and check on the mint plants, would you? I'm worried those pests got to them during the night again."

I grab my hot tea and walk out the kitchen door toward the back

garden. The mint is fine, of course. They simply want privacy so they can talk about me. I take a seat on our old stone bench and blow on my tea to cool it off while I think about the summons, as well as what happened last night. I still don't know what to make of it—or what to do about it.

Summoned to the palace. Certainly the girls in town, always copying the nobility's latest hairstyles and necklines—they wouldn't hesitate for a second. They'd think me a fool for even questioning it. Admittedly some small part of me would revel in seeing their expressions when the honey girl turns into a courtier. But the amusement would be brief.

I'm meant for so much more. Now I know some things even my mother doesn't know, that the Guild doesn't know. There are still secrets at Baer Abbey. The Aphrasians are not as weak and scattered as believed. Though Caledon is guilty of killing the grand prince, he is not a murderer, but a hero. He saved my life. The court needs to know. The queen needs to know.

And suddenly it occurs to me that it's not such a terrible thing that I have been called to Viola Ruza.