

THREADS THAT BIND

KIKA HATZOPOULOU





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~ PART I ~
ONE TO WEAVE

PROLOGUE

SNAP

THE STREETCAR SLICED ahead inches above the tidewater. As it came to a stop before the station, the cables groaned with the weight of the overpacked carriage. Passengers twisted their heads to glower up at them. Just the other day, a cable had snapped over at Sage Street, emptying passengers into the malformed canal. Three had ended up in the hospital; the bay water was cruelly cold, even this close to summer.

The old lady in the back of the streetcar twirled her liver-spotted fingers over her chest, as if tying an invisible knot. She wasn't moira-born, held no true substance between her fingers but air. It was a common gesture, meant to ward off the youngest sister of the Moirae, the goddess of Fate who decides when a life-thread is to be cut.

Knot it once, the saying went, and she will know you're still fighting.

In the Silts, people added a second verse: *Knot it a thousand times, and she will still cut it.*

The old lady wasn't from the Silts. She wore a fur-lined coat, pristine and unpatched, and her gray hair was styled in upper-class fashion, braided and pinned at her nape. But her hairpins were missing the jade stones that should have decorated them, a dull bronze shell left in their absence.

The cables squealed in farewell when the streetcar took off. The old lady waited for the passengers to clear the station, then started over the bridge, tugging a shopping cart behind her, its wheels echoing piercingly over every dent on the bridge. The streets were

empty, yet she glanced at every shifting shadow and fleeting sound.

Her husband, who'd been twenty years older and enjoyed frightening his guileless wife, had told her something foul swam the flooded streets of the city of Alante at night. It hid in girls' shadows, he taunted, curled around their ankles, and never, ever let go. The woman had buried him a long time ago. She rarely thought about him nowadays but had begun to think of the foul monster daily. She could swear she felt it. A shackle around her ankle, dragging behind her.

How she wished to be moira-born, to feel the threads of life solid and whole in her fingers. She quickened her step, eager to be safe at home: nestled in blankets on her armchair, spirit-laced tea in hand, the latest episode of her favorite drama playing on the radio.

It must have already started; when she slipped into her apartment, she went straight for the radio, filling the room with the familiar voices of the cast, then began putting away her meager groceries—chamomile tea, a packet of cheese crackers, and a discounted jar of dried figs—when she suddenly sensed the impress of a body moving through air.

A hand clasped her mouth. The jar slipped from her fingers, clattering to the floor. She struggled to get free, kicking, elbowing, scratching blindly at her assailant. Her bun came undone, white wisps of hair floating across her vision, the heels of her boots became sticky with crushed figs. On the other side of the wall, a neighbor called her name in concern.

“Don't worry,” they whispered in her ear—she couldn't tell if it was a man or a woman or a shadow-shrouded monster—“this is not the end.”

If the woman had gotten her wish, if she had been moira-born, she would have felt them plucking her life-thread from the tangle

of her other threads. She'd have watched them trace her life-thread up, where it stretched toward the ceiling, disappearing into the sky above. She'd have seen them take one of their own threads, stretching it between two fingers, silver and sharp as steel.

But the woman only heard:

SNAP!

And the thread was cut.

FRAYING

IO STOOD AT the edge of the roof, trying to convince herself to take the first step.

She had explained it a thousand times: it wasn't heights she was afraid of, but rather . . . edges. She had no problem riding the trolley, she could tap-dance across terraces, but she would have to halt, take a few deep breaths, and mentally coax herself in order to cross a hanging bridge.

"Little idiot," her sister Thais would say when Io was younger. "You're moira-born. You can see the threads of Fate. Do you see your life-thread fraying any time soon?"

Sharing a knowing look, Thais and their other sister, Ava, would then tackle Io to the ground. All three of them wrestled, limbs tangled and grins feral, until Io admitted defeat. Ava would draw Io's life-thread out and give it a couple of tugs. It stretched like a chain of silver, and just as bright.

"Look at that," Thais would chide. "Strong as ever."

"She likes being afraid," Ava would chuckle. "So that she has a reason to do nothing."

And young Io would whine every time, "I do *not*!"

How she hated to whine. It was their fault: they treated her like a child, so like a child she behaved. The girls' parents, before their deaths, had worked at the Neraida Plains out of the city, leaving their daughters to care for themselves from a young age. Thais, the oldest, took on the role of warden, cleaning and cooking and

managing their money, while Ava, two years younger, busied herself with fun, inventing games to occupy their time and reading people's fortunes for a little extra cash. And so Io, the youngest, born six years after Ava, became the baby, looked after and teased. *One soul split in three bodies*, they whispered conspiratorially, heads huddled together in their shared bed.

Of course, that was years ago. Before Thais left town, before everything changed.

Io stepped carefully onto the bridge. It bounced under her weight, groaning with every step. Not really designed for humans, this bridge. It was a long, thin strip of metal built specifically for cats, to allow them a way to roam the city during the flooded high tides—the city's master plan to curb the growing population of rodents that carried diseases through the streets.

The problem with these cat bridges was that they had no railings. *Cats don't lose their balance*, the city officials declared. But that wasn't true; cats could slip and fall like any other creature—they just tended to land on their feet. Io thought the whole thing was counterintuitive; there was nothing to land on under the bridges, only murky tidewater, which, as already established, cats hate.

There should have been railings. There weren't. A statement that pretty much summed up the Sunken City of Alante, in Io's opinion. Needs were never met. People demanded, were denied, and learned to make do with what they had.

Io had no railings, but she had fear, lots of it. She wrapped it around her, clutched tight like a shield. Here's what her sisters never grasped: fear didn't numb you. It made you cautious, alert. Io was always, *always* alert. That was why she excelled at this job. She walked, with small, methodical steps, across the bridge, puffing her cheeks out in relief when she stood on solid ground again.

The roof hatch of the abandoned theater had been boarded up haphazardly; Io slipped through with ease. Mold and rot hit her nostrils as she followed the stairs down, a hand on the wall to guide her through the heavy darkness. Moonlight silvered the grand hall. The planks of the stage were bloated with humidity, and the rest of the theater, all two thousand seats, was completely submerged in water, dark impressions of what must have once been velvet cushions. She pulled her scarf over her nose and made her way around the gallery to the balconies, of which the middle one had collapsed years ago, bringing the wall down with it.

It was an ugly sight: wood and wires and cement hanging like the entrails of a gutted beast. But the view beyond it was nice. The ripped-out balcony of the Beak Street Theater was one of the few places in the Silts where you had an unobstructed view of all three moons. Pandia, the biggest and brightest; Nemea, traveling the bottom of the horizon; and Ersä, which dawned and set in a matter of hours. Only Ersä was up now, bathing the world in her milky pink light. The dew-covered wallpaper glazed rosy, the water on the streets a soft cherry. It made the city, flooded to the brim with the night tide, almost beautiful. One day, Io would save enough for a camera and immortalize the otherworldly sight.

In the apartment building across from the theater, the light in the far-left window of the third floor flickered on. Io tore her gaze away from the moon and put her spectacles on. Sure enough, it was the very apartment she had been hired to watch. A figure moved inside—maybe two? She slid down and grounded her palms on the splintered wood of the balcony. *Before you slip into the Quilt, make sure you're safe*, Thais used to instruct. *We don't want you walking off a rooftop, do we?*

Io blinked and the Quilt appeared, a jumble of threads laid over the physical world. Only moira-born, descendants of the

goddesses of Fate, could see the lines of silver that sprouted from every person, connecting them to the things they loved most in the world. Io focused on the apartment on the third floor. In the Quilt, she saw beyond brick and wood, straight to the two people in the apartment. Dozens of threads emerged from their bodies, linking them to the many different places, things, and people they loved. One of the brightest threads connected the two figures together, pulsing vividly, the kind of luster that consumed everything. *The singular brilliance of a love-thread*, in Ava's moonstruck words.

The singular tedium of a pain in the neck, more likely. A sigh escaped Io's lips. Why was it always cheating? Why couldn't it be a weird hobby or a late-night class for once, something that wouldn't crush her clients' souls? Io could picture it clearly: tomorrow, her client, Isidora Magnussen, would sit at the table farthest back in the café on Sage Street, her coat wrung like a dish towel in her hands, and Io would have to tell her, *Yes, your husband did go to the apartment he supposedly sold three weeks ago. Yes, he had company.* Then the hardest part came: *Does he love her?* Any other private detective could shrug and say, *How would I know?*

But Io was different. Io was moira-born. It was why clients chose her; they didn't just want to know if their loved ones were cheating or gambling or drinking. They wanted to know the secrets that only the Quilt could reveal: if their spouses loved cheating and gambling and drinking more than they loved *them*.

And Io would have to tell her. *I'm sorry, Mrs. Magnussen. Their thread is so bright I couldn't stand to look at it for more than two seconds. It means your husband's in love with his mistress. It means I want to slip through a hole in the café floor and never come out.* That was what put a roof over Io's head and food on the plate: breaking people's hearts.

She watched the two figures a while longer, just to be sure. She

made out no bodies in the Quilt, only the threads, but there was no mistaking it: the couple came together, silver interweaving in a slow embrace. Io's cheeks heated—she glanced away.

Something caught her attention. Close to the couple, on the third floor of the apartment building. It was a person, but also . . . not.

The un-person only had one thread. People loved in multitudes; they got attached to others, to places, to objects, to ideas. The average person's thread count was fifteen. Newborn infants had the fewest: their life-thread, a thread to their mother, and a thread to food—the last two usually one and the same. This person, however, standing in what must be the apartment building hallway, had a single thread. On its own, that was improbable, but not impossible.

What was impossible was that the thread was severed. It came out of the person's chest on one end, and the other just flopped limp to the floor, where it frayed into nothing. Threads *connected*—there was no such thing as a one-ended thread.

And worst of all, the severed thread was tilted at an unnatural angle, like the person was gripping it in both fists. Stretched tight and sharp, as though meant to cut someone else's threads. This single-threaded person, this impossibility, was a cutter. Io knew, because Io was a cutter, too.

The cutter was edging toward the lovers' apartment, their lone thread a raised weapon. Io's shoulders tensed. Her breath caught in her lungs.

Little idiot, her sister berated in Io's mind.

She breathed out and ran.



The apartment door had been left ajar.

Her heart pounded against her chest as she stepped inside. There

was a long corridor with three open doors, all sheltering darkness. Io had dropped the Quilt to focus on getting to the building, but now she pulled it back up. In the second room down the corridor: the cutter and their single thread, gripped between their hands. A separate bundle of threads cowering in the corner.

Io could taste her terror in her mouth, sharp and sour. Her steps felt slow and lagging, as though she were underwater. Her fingers snatched up one of her own threads—it didn't matter which right now—and wrapped it around her index finger and thumb. Only a thread could cut another thread. If this person was armed, Io would be, too.

The apartment was carpeted, muffling the sounds of her foot-falls. A mirror hung in the hallway with a narrow table beneath, full of little bottles of cosmetics. In the reflection, a woman stood in the middle of the living room, gray hair coming undone from a braided bun at her nape, waist jutting forward unnaturally. Her single thread tumbled from her fingers to the floor, its frayed end curling around her ankle like a pet snake.

Io couldn't comprehend what she was seeing. Up close, this thread had the brilliant luster of a life-thread, the most important of a person's threads, a connection to life itself. Normally, life-threads shot up into the sky, disappearing among the clouds. But this one flopped on the floor, unconnected, monstrous in its wrongness.

This woman should be dead.

Io noticed the body on the floor. She recognized him instantly—Mrs. Magnussen had shown her their wedding photos. He wore nothing but a pair of striped boxers, his neck bent unnaturally. Ersä painted his naked flesh in a lively pink, but it was a lie. No threads in the Quilt. The body was a corpse. Rattling breaths drew her attention farther into the room, where a woman in lingerie was hiding behind an armchair, sobbing silently into her knees. It took Io a moment to

place that white-blond hair: Mr. Magnussen's assistant. She had spotted them together this morning, having a smoke in the street outside their office. At the time, it had looked like innocent chitchat. Now it was evident she was his secret paramour.

The old woman with the abnormal thread stood still as a statue, surveying the room over her nose. In Ersä's moonlight, her silver hair seemed dipped in rosebuds. Io should go. She should backtrack to the front door, scream the whole building awake, find some way to get the old woman away from the assistant.

Move, she begged herself. She drew in a deep breath.

In the silence, her sharp inhale was a gunshot. The woman slanted her neck; their eyes locked in the mirror.

"There are crimes," the old woman said, removed as if in a trance, "that cannot go unpunished. I will rise from the ashes a daughter of flame."

And before Io could react, the old woman rushed at her, a whirlwind of white hair and sharp bones. Their bodies collided; Io fell on her back. The woman was on her, thrashing with no thought or reason, scratching at Io's face and chest. Io put her arms up and tried to kick the woman off her, striking the wall instead.

At the loud sound, the old woman stopped altogether and gazed down at Io. Or rather, at the thread between Io's thumb and index finger. "What a pretty thread. Little moira-born," she rasped. "I see you. I see your crimes, too."

Io had a second to think—*What crimes?*

To shudder—*Which crimes?*

To panic—*I have committed so many.*

Then the old woman was hammering her again with jagged fingernails. Pain stung Io's cheek and neck, jolting her out of her shock. She grabbed the first thing she saw, the woman's hair, and

pulled. With a fiendish scream, the woman dropped away. In seconds, Io was up, running toward the open door. The woman launched after Io, bumping into the walls.

“Hide!” Io screamed over her shoulder at the crying assistant, hoping she would obey.

The moment she crossed the door, Io started shouting for help, glancing back at the maniacal creature coming after her. It *moved* like a creature, scurrying on all fours and lashing out with crooked fingers. And the thread, that terrible limp life-thread, was still in her hand, a weapon ready to strike.

“Help me, dammit,” Io screamed, battering both fists on a door.

The knock cost her; in a flash, the woman had caught up. Her fingers latched on to Io’s trouser leg. Io went down with a thud, landing hard on her palms and knees. She twisted and saw, in terror, that one of her threads was in the woman’s right hand.

And then a door burst open, spilling light into the hall. A tall, dark-skinned man screamed at them in a foreign language—Kurkz?

The old woman over Io paused.

That was all Io needed. A pause. A moment. A breath.

She pulled her knee in and kicked the woman’s jaw, hard. The creature flew back in an arc. Io scrambled away, putting distance between her and those insidious fingers. She straightened when her back hit the wall at the end of the corridor, cool air coming through the tall open window behind her.

Other residents emerged from their apartments. The Kurkz man was marching toward them. Io wanted to motion him to stay away, to call for help, but why wasn’t her voice working—

Suddenly, the woman filled Io’s sight, lunging for her, the severed life-thread a rope of silver in her left fist. Close, so close that Io felt wisps of hair on her face just before she stepped aside from the

open window. The woman noticed it too late; she tried to stop, but momentum shoved her forward. Her legs smacked on the window ledge, her waist pitched forward, and she tipped, head over heels, out the window.

There was a distant splash as she hit the tidewater flooding the streets. Io's breath became shallow, as though her lungs were constricted to half their size. Her hands were numb, one holding the window frame, the other closed around the random thread of her own that she had grabbed to protect herself.

She didn't move when the Kurkz man shook her shoulders, when he leaned out the window and announced the woman was gone. She stood there, wheezing, and slowly, very slowly, the world came back into focus: the people emerging from their apartments, their robes and socks, their tousled hair, their languages.

She was still in the same spot, back to the wall, fists clenched, when she felt a vibration in her chest. One of her threads was pulsating; had the old woman harmed it? Io's body tensed, bubbling with panic—she had no energy left for another fight.

The thread stretched taut, leading straight down the corridor, into the chest of the young man who had just come running up the stairs. Broad shouldered and brown skinned, with brass knuckles on his right fist. He glanced the other way, then this way, and saw her. Io got the sense he recognized her, his eyebrows dipping low over his dark eyes.

“Where'd she go?” he asked.

Io jerked her chin out the window. He turned and left, taking her thread with him. Io had never seen him before, but she knew who he was all the same.

Her fate-thread.

The boy she was destined to love.

A WRAITH

SOFT SNIFFLING SOUNDS were coming from the apartment bathroom. Io leaned her forehead against the door, trying to cast out any thoughts about her fate-thread and the boy on the other end of it—now was *not* the time. She knocked once, softly.

“You can come out now,” she said against the wood. “She’s gone.”

The lock screeched, the door inching open. The assistant’s eyes were two wide circles of fear in the shadows of the room, framed by thin eyebrows and hair so blond it was almost white. Nina Panagou, Io remembered from her research, aged thirty-three, Mr. Magnussen’s assistant for the past eight years. Nina was slumped against the tiled wall, her cheeks streaked with makeup, the long shard of a mirror in her fist. Clever of her; she had smashed the sink mirror to create a makeshift weapon.

Io sat on her haunches at the door frame, eye level with the woman. “Are you all right?”

“Is Jarl—” Nina’s gaze flicked left, where the living room lay.

Io’s jaw tightened. Certified deliverer of bad news, professional breaker of hearts. “I’m so sorry.”

The woman’s eyes watered, her voice growing high and nasal. “She just burst in, out of nowhere. Jarl told me to hide, and I . . .” She trailed off.

“Did you recognize her?” Io asked quietly. “Is she someone you or Jarl might know?”

Nina was shaking her head. “I didn’t, but she kept talking like she

knew Jarl. She kept saying that she could see crimes on him. That crimes demand punishment. What does that even mean?"

"I'm not sure," Io whispered. "Did she say the same thing to you?"

"No. She saw me, where I was hiding behind the armchair, but she said only, *I cannot punish you, child. Your crimes are not truly yours.* Then her attention turned on Jarl. Gods, *Jarl.*" The woman's shoulders rattled with sobs, head dropping into her palms. "She was standing across the room, but she was choking him. I'm not sure how—"

Guilt shot through Io's mind. She had little to offer the woman in terms of explanations. A secret rendezvous that had transformed into her beloved's death at the hands of a terrifying old woman. But Nina hadn't been a target—she had just been in the wrong place at the wrong time. Io's own body was still electrified with terror. She couldn't even begin to imagine what this woman must be going through right now.

"The police will be here soon," she told the woman. "Are you going to be all right with them? I can get you out before they arrive."

In the eyes of the police, there were few innocents in the Silts. All of them had taken up work for the gangs at one point or another, even if it was just bussing tables at their clubs or mopping the floors of their gambling dens. For people like Io and Nina, it was honest work, the kind that harmed no one and put food on the table. For the police, however, it was as good as a conviction. They would not treat you kindly, even if you had just witnessed your lover's murder and survived a rampaging killer.

"No, but please." The woman reached out, lacquered nails clipping around Io's wrist. Her skin was pinpricked all down her arm; she must be freezing. Io needed to fetch her clothes from the living room, perhaps also find a sheet to cover Jarl Magnussen's body.

She cupped Nina's hand with her own. "Don't worry. I'm not going anywhere. I'll be right here."



The officers called to the scene took everyone's deposition, sent Nina home with the backup, alerted the boat patrols to search the Silts for the old woman, then insisted on escorting Io home.

The building Io and Ava lived in used to be a tobacco factory; the officers wrinkled their noses against the lingering pungency while Io unlocked the door. It hit the chain and bounced back. Io knocked until Ava opened the door, her hair tousled, her eyes bloodshot. Whatever quip was firing up on Ava's smirking lips sputtered out when she saw the policemen over Io's shoulder.

They said they wanted to see Io's file on Isidora Magnussen's case, but Io knew better. They wanted to check her out. She was a cutter—that fact alone made her a possible threat. She could have ditched the whole scene before the police arrived, but what was the point? There were eyewitnesses who had seen her face. All the officers had to do was scour the public registry for the moira-born in the city and there her address would be. No privacy for other-born, thanks to the Kinship Treaty. Plus, she had wanted to make sure Nina would be taken care of.

Io sidestepped her sister and began shuffling through the desk beneath her lofted bed. Two long minutes passed, during which she was excruciatingly aware of the two officers studying their apartment, until she found the damn file and handed it over.

"Are you a moira-born, too?" the male officer asked Ava, his gaze inspecting every inch of their apartment.

"Uh-huh." Her sister was leaning against their kitchen island,

green satin robe revealing long, curvy legs. She challenged him with a raised brow. "Need to see my papers, too?"

Part certificate of birth, part medical records, part court-evaluated mental health status, and almost entirely badge of shame, other-born papers stated the nature of their powers and their known relatives. Other-born always came in a package: in two or three or more siblings descended from sibling gods. Myths talked of the existence of other gods, too, but only twin, sister or brother divinities bestowed their progenies with power. Some believed the power was too much for a single person to inherit, but Thais disagreed. *Multitude is power*, she used to say. *We are stronger together*.

Ignoring Ava, the man called across the room, "Anything interesting, captain?"

The female officer was thumbing through Io's notes on the Magnussen case, eyes half-closed, brows raised, as if she was doubtful of every word on the page. Io stood ramrod straight, trying to talk herself out of going ballistic on these officers. All she had to do was wait for this humiliation to end. It might take a long time, depending on how cruel the cops decided to be, but it *would* end. She kept meticulous files, and her other-born papers were squeaky clean. They had been sorted out before she was even born; her parents already had two daughters who could see the Quilt, which could only mean a third was on the way. The moira-born always came in three, like the Moirae, the goddesses of Fate, themselves.

The firstborn was the spinner, who could weave new threads. The second was the drawer; she could elongate or shorten a thread, intensifying or weakening the corresponding feeling. And the youngest was the cutter, able to cut whatever thread she desired, even life-threads.

Cutters were the dangerous ones. Cutters were the villains in radio dramas, and the first suspects in crime investigations. Cutters were escorted home to have their case files checked, even when they had their private investigator license, complete and up to date, on their person and a dozen eyewitnesses confirming their innocence.

But Io could wield patience like a weapon. Day-long stakeouts and hours skimming through public records? Her favorite part of the job, to be honest. Sliding her leather jacket off, she grabbed a piece of spinach cheese pie from the kitchen counter. The phyllo was divinely fresh and crunched loudly under her teeth. The male officer transferred his glare from Ava to her.

Her sister asked, "What exactly did you do, sister mine?"

Io shrugged. In her calmest, most measured tone, she said, "I did nothing. I was hired to investigate a man that was murdered tonight by an old woman who then assaulted me and escaped. The officers want to see my notes on the case."

"They don't leave a stone unturned, do they? Our city's heroes," Ava said sweetly. Then, in alarm, "The old woman tried to kill you?"

"That's not even the worst part. Her life-thread was cut. It was hanging limp from her hand."

"That's impossible. She would be dead."

A shudder carved down Io's skin. "But she wasn't."

"A *wraith*."

That last comment had come from the female officer. She was Iyen, light-skinned with dark eyes and a muscled stature that filled her uniform to the brim. "That's what you called her in your statement, Miss Ora. *The silver-haired wraith*."

Io didn't remember that. Then again, she didn't remember much after the woman had fallen out the window: only the rasping of

her heart, the sting of her scratches, the assistant's cheeks stained with tears, the shock of seeing the boy on the other end of her fate-thread for the first time.

"Odd choice of words," said the male officer from the doorway. "Why *wraith*, cutter?"

"Sounds better than ghost," answered Ava, pulling her black curls over a shoulder to reveal the shaved side of her head. It was an intentional move, Io knew—a brass ear cuff covered the top of her ear, its characteristic muted color marking her as one of the Fortuna gang.

The cop's eyes widened; he whispered something to his partner. The woman made a grunt and tucked the Magnussen case file under her armpit. "I'm taking this with me. I suggest you don't leave town, Miss Ora. We might be in contact in the next few days."

They headed out without another word. Even the cops hesitated before Bianca Rossi, owner of the Fortuna and unchallenged mob queen of the Silts.

Ava closed the door behind them and eyed Io. "Are you all right?"

She nodded. The scratches throbbed and the back of her head was pounding, and *she had seen her fate-thread for the first time*—but she would be okay. Bolt the door and lock the windows, and this suffocating pressure on her chest would disappear. It always did. But no rest just yet. She made for the door.

"Where are you going?"

"The wife," Io explained, shouldering the familiar warmth of her worn jacket. It was her mom's; too small for Ava and not Thais's style, so Io had inherited it, a leftover presented as a gift. She didn't really mind; old, worn leather was one of her favorite smells. "I have to inform the wife before they paint me as the villain of the story."

Ava's face contracted with concern. "I'll come with you."

There was a knock on the door.

“What now,” mumbled Io under her breath. She left the chain on as she opened the door.

In the sliver between wood, she saw *him*.

The boy from earlier tonight, the one she shared a fate-thread with. Gods, did she have to think about *that*, too, right now?

He stood far from the door, as though to lessen the threat of his massive form. He had dark skin, eyes the color of milky coffee, and tight curls cropped close to his scalp. Brass knuckles hung from a loop on his belt. Io’s eyes stuck on the weapon—the preferred choice of Fortuna gang members—and her breath lodged at the base of her neck. This was the mob queen’s signature: the curved imprint of knuckles upon flesh.

“Edei?” Ava said from behind Io. “Edei Rhuna, what are you doing here?”

Concealed by the wood, Io mouthed to her sister, *What the absolute hell*. Io had managed, through no small inconvenience, to avoid the boy at the other end of her fate-thread for the better part of three years and Ava *knew* him? Was on a *first-name basis* with him? Outright treason, that’s what this was.

Edei Rhuna nodded hello.

In a low voice and with a furtive glance, he told Io, “The boss wants to see you.”

THE RIGHT THING TO DO

IO DIDN'T LIE often, but when she did, she committed thoroughly. Here was the lie she told herself, almost daily: she didn't care about the fate-thread.

Thais had noticed it first, when she was eighteen and Io was ten, barely a year after their parents' death. They were on the terrace of their old apartment building, lazing about in the first truly warm day after a fortnight of a relentless neo-monsoon. Early-spring pollen floated downwind from the gardens of District-on-the-Hill, making Io sneeze incessantly.

"That's odd," Thais had said, stretching one of Io's threads between her fingers. "This thread seems to lead off to somewhere unknown." She tugged it to show Io: like a beam of silver light, it arced across the roof and over the city, disappearing into the horizon. "It must be a fate-thread. How thrilling—my moira-born tutor said they're rarer than the triple moonset."

Io bounced on her feet, Thais's excitement sugaring her tongue. These were her favorite moments: Thais coaching her in the Quilt about what moira-born like them could do, Thais excited, Thais smiling.

"What's a fate-thread?" Io asked.

Thais leaned back on the slanted tiles. "Threads connect people to what they care about. A person you have met, an object you have used, a place you have been. You love it, deeply, and a thread is formed. But there are some rare threads that exist before the attachment is formed.

They lead to whoever or whatever you are destined to love, one day.”

“Like your home-thread?”

Thais had a rare thread, too, which Mama always gushed about to anyone who’d listen: *Have you heard about my Thais’s home-thread? That’s true love, isn’t it? It’s dedication to our home, to all of Alante. One day, my baby girl is going to do great things for this city, just you wait.* The city was a part of Thais, a kernel of her soul.

“It’s nothing like my home-thread.” Thais dropped Io’s thread. “I *earned* my home-thread. I prove my love for this city every day. What have you done to deserve this?”

And she marched away, leaving Io to feel, for some reason, ashamed.

But that initial exhilaration was hard to shake. A passion she was yet to meet. A love she was destined to feel. It soothed her, like waking up after a particularly convincing dream. As she grew, the fate-thread birthed a myriad of possibilities: she would discover a new craft, find an eager friend, a long-lost relative coming to pull them out of the quicksand drop to poverty. Or—and she blushed to think of this—someone to hold her and kiss her like they did in the radio dramas.

And one day when she was fifteen, Io’s chest began . . . tingling. The fate-thread was moving. Every day, after school, she would climb to their roof and watch whatever lay on the other end of the thread edging toward her. She and her lovely unknown were celestial objects orbiting ever closer, destined for an inevitable collision.

He arrived the day before Winter’s Feast.

Thais had sunk into their sofa, exhausted after a double shift, clothes stinking of fried food. She slumped a leg into Io’s lap, over the homework she had been doing. “It’s a boy. Your fate-thread.”

Io kept her eyes to the notebook, swallowing her shock like a mouthful of bitter medicine. “How do you know?”

"I couldn't leave you pining on the roof every night—you'll catch your death. I followed your thread today. It leads to a boy."

Ava hooted over the pot of bean soup she was stirring. "A boy! Tell us everything."

Thais gave their sister a scornful look. "There's not much to tell. He's young, Io's age, or maybe a year older. He just arrived in the city, spent the entire morning at the immigration offices at the West Gate." Then she focused back on Io and her eyes softened. "I'm sorry, but—he was with someone, Io."

Io pressed her lips together, in her best attempt at a poker face. Her mind was a whirlwind that she couldn't comprehend. She didn't even know this boy—she shouldn't feel betrayed. And yet.

"So what?" said Ava.

"What do you mean 'so what,' you heathen?" scolded Thais. "How would you feel, if a girl came up to you and said you were destined to love her?"

"Depends on how cute she was."

Thais rolled her eyes.

"How cute is *he*?" Ava asked, wiggling her eyebrows.

Io had felt suddenly very small, and very lonely. "Ava, drop it."

"Oh, get over yourself, Io." Ava jabbed the ladle in Io's direction. "What if he is with someone? Doesn't he deserve to know that there's this thing between you, a fated thread? Maybe it's not even a thread of love; it doesn't have to be, you know. He could be your future best friend, or a cherished ally, or a faithful business partner, or your, like . . . art muse. You can't hide behind your fears forever; you have to find him and tell him."

"Let her be, Ava," Thais butted in. "Wouldn't it be cruel if someone approached your girlfriend and told her they were her fated soul mate?"

“Well.” Ava pulled the corners of her lips down comically in an *EEK* face.

Thais nodded, her mothering instincts sated. “Telling him is not the right thing to do.”

The pressure around Io’s rib cage loosened; there was a right thing to do. Of course there was, and of course Thais knew it.

“What should I do, then?” she asked, eager for a solution to this unwanted problem.

“Cut the thread. Set him free.”

Her body rejected the idea instantaneously: her chest constricted, muscles tensing for a blow. She couldn’t *cut* it. For five years, the fate-thread had been her anchor, a constant reminder that no matter how hard life became—her parents’ death, their struggling finances, the sorrow she could see in her sisters’ eyes—there was something waiting for her, a thread blazing silver against the horizon. One day, it would come, and one day, she would be happy. It was fate, impossible and otherworldly and utterly *hers*. No, she wouldn’t cut it.

Thais read every thought, every feeling crossing Io’s face. A scowl surfaced on her sister’s brow. “It will be hard, but it’s for the better, sister mine. You don’t want to rob him of his choice, do you?”

Io said nothing.

After a while, Thais rose and went to wash. They ate bean soup. They discussed the latest mystery serial on the radio. In the months that followed, Io began to ignore the thread. It was especially hard now that the boy was so close; he had found a place in the Silts, Io had deduced, and Ava saw him frequently at the diner where she bussed tables. The fate-thread tugged at Io’s chest; often, before she knew it, she would take a step in its direction. But in her ruthlessly honest way, Thais was right.

The boy had a choice, and right now he was choosing someone else. Io had to respect that.

But she, too, had a choice. Cut it or keep it. The threads of Fate were manifestations of what you loved, and in turn who you were. Io had to find out what her fate was, who she was destined to become. Its light shone brighter than all her other threads combined, an anchor and a beacon and a promise of better things to come. She chose to keep it.

She stopped mentioning it to her sisters entirely, fearing Thais might convince her to cut it, and dreading Ava might talk her into seeking the boy out. A year after the boy arrived in Alante, Thais left them; with her, left Io's fear.

Sometimes, she caught Ava looking at her from the corner of her eyes. Words bubbled on her sister's lips, ready to take shape.

Even now, almost three years later, Ava would blurt out, "I saw him today."

Io always remained silent.

"Don't you want to know who he is, what he does?"

"I don't care," Io always lied, hoping one day, it would be true.

A THRONE GILDED WITH KNOCKED-OUT TEETH

ONE DID NOT deny the mob queen, or the messengers she sent to their doors. Those who had tried no longer had a tongue to deny her with. So Io made herself close the door behind her, ignoring whatever her sister was trying to mouth, and followed Edei Rhuna—a reminder of the right thing Io didn't do—out of the building. He was surprisingly polite, for one of Bianca Rossi's strongarms. He adjusted his faster stride to Io's. He kept the hanging bridge steady until she crossed. He glanced at her only when needed, to check she was keeping pace, which was good: too much eye contact, or none at all, was suspicious.

The thought needled her. There was nothing for her to be suspicious about. What was she watching him for? It took her seconds to realize: the fate-thread. She wondered if he knew about it, if it had anything to do with why he was in the apartment uilding across from the abandoned theater.

She stole glances, hyperaware of every little thing about him: The neckline of his wool sweater. A fading bruise on his jaw. His shoes, hard worker's boots that should have woken up the neighborhood but didn't. The smell of some kind of oil, shining on his tight curls. His nose, long and straight, and his full lips—

Don't be weird, Io.

But things had head-dived into weird and come up into uncanny the moment she saw him in that dark corridor, right after her near-death experience. Now she was walking by his side and knew his name and his job and his face, and *the whole world was tilting on its axis.*

He couldn't know, right? Ava and Thais would never have told him. There were a few other moira-born in the city who could detect their fate-thread, but Edei didn't seem like the type to pay preposterous amounts for a fortune teller's reading.

Should *she* tell him? Gods, the thought alone was too terrifying to examine. She'd see what this summons from the mob queen was about, and then she would decide.

They climbed to the North Walkway to find a line of passersby waiting. An outlier gang was tolling people to cross it, which could often turn violent. She made to retreat to find another path, but Edei slipped the brass knuckles onto his fist and rapped a beat onto the nearest streetlight. Four beats, pause, two beats, pause, three fast ones.

An answering rap came from down the block; within minutes, a Fortuna patrol came out of the alleyways, five of them armed with iron bars. The Fortuna gang acted like law enforcers in the Silts; cops rarely deigned to step foot in a place submerged in tide and filled with chimerini—the small, bloodthirsty animal hybrids that lurked in Alante's deep waters—unless, of course, they were running a raid. Bianca Rossi ruled the Silts, and she actually made a decent job of it: kept outliers from levying bridges, ran petty criminals out of the district, hunted down the most dangerous chimerini before they got hungry and preyed on people. She even supported worker unions.

The outlier gang took one look at them and bolted with whatever tolls they could grab. Edei steered Io to the newly liberated Walkway, where the Fortuna kids saluted him with brass knuckles to the brow.

Who exactly was he in the gang hierarchy? Every member of the Fortuna gang knew the knuckle raps, even Ava, who was only a singer at their club and didn't partake in any of the more unsanitary

activities of the gang. But Edei Rhuna didn't just know the raps. He was high enough on the mob queen's retinue to earn a salute from the younger members.

The Fortuna Club came into view, two bouncers guarding its main entrance at the rooftop, bathed in the violet glow of the neon sign above their heads. The building was one of the trendiest places in the Silts, albeit a little tacky, in Io's opinion. The brick walls were hued black, the windows rimmed with gold paint, the glass tinted a shadowy gray. Electrical wires spilled like veins from its body to feed the chandeliers, mics, and dozens of gambling mechanisms inside. The two bridges connecting it to the rooftops across the street were retractable, a gaudy expense customary in wealthier districts that must have cost Bianca Rossi a fortune. Rumor was that after her rise to power during the Moonset Riots, an eight-day-long violent gang war twelve years ago that almost wiped out the Silts, she lived in constant fear of being attacked again.

The bouncers made to search Io—the Fortuna had a strict no-guns rule—but Edei nodded once and the two men stepped aside, holding the door open. Edei led her down carpeted corridors, piano music drifting up from the gambling pit on the ground floor. He knocked at a nondescript door but didn't wait for an answer before entering.

Bianca Rossi's office was as flamboyant as the rest of the club. Ornate black wood covered every wall and the ceiling, a superfluous extravagance given how fast the city's humidity would destroy it. A fluffy white carpet sat in the middle of the room, enveloped by heavy furniture: a sofa and two armchairs, a bar with rows upon rows of drinks, a desk inlaid with what looked like leviathan scales. A long window stood behind the desk.

The sun had begun its ascent, soaking the office in deep reds and

setting Bianca Rossi's blond hair aflame. The mob queen of the Silts was in her early thirties, lean as a cat, with several skin discolorations on her neck and arms. Ersa's kisses, people called them—named for the largest of Alante's moons. Legend said that these lightened spots were the debris that fell from the sky the night the one moon split into three.

Bianca never wore anything but men's suits, tailored to cinch her waist and hug her long legs. Tonight, the suit was dark green velvet, the look completed by a lime silk tie around her neck. Ever since she started singing at the Fortuna a year ago, Ava came home every day with a new tale of how cool her boss was, but Io didn't buy it—Bianca Rossi ruled from a throne gilded with knocked-out teeth.

The mob queen sat back from her paperwork and spoke with a thick Silts accent, drawling every vowel. "Io Ora."

Io took the seat Bianca gestured at, noticing that Edei remained standing by the door. "Why am I here?" she asked, more sharply than she intended.

Bianca's face shone with mirth. "I do like you Ora sisters. Direct, verging on rude, yet never quite crossing it. Once, a customer was getting handsy with your sister—has she ever told you that story? I sent Edei here to help her, but by the time he reached her, Ava had already broken the man's nose against the table. And when I asked why she didn't just wait for help, you know what she said? *My mama taught me to take no prisoners.* Was that a lesson you took to heart, too, Io?"

It felt like buttering up, which meant it probably was. "Why am I here, Ms. Rossi?"

Bianca cocked her head to the left. It was an exaggerated movement, theatrical, and Io wondered at its purpose. To intimidate her? She didn't dare pull up the Quilt to look at Bianca's threads.

The woman would notice the unnatural glaze of silver reflected in Io's eyes. She would be reminded that Io was a cutter, sinister and unreliable. *Patience like a knife*, Io told herself. Patience always paid off.

"I am told you are a sleuth."

Io nodded, waiting. This wasn't why she had been escorted here at the crack of dawn.

"And that you were attacked last night by an unusual assailant."

This wasn't what she was here for, either.

"Luckily, we are not as useless as the city's officials." At Bianca's nod, the door behind them opened. "Look what Edei caught for you."

And there she was. The wraith.

Two gang members prodded her in with long brass bars, a red-headed boy and a black girl in a skin-tight athletic outfit. The office filled immediately with the pungency of rot. The woman smelled and looked derelict: torn clothes hanging off her shoulders, shoes soaked with mud, wet hair stuck on her pasty skin.

Io's gaze came to rest on Edei, taking him in from head to toe. He wore a different wool sweater than when she first saw him earlier, and his boots left little wet imprints on the dark wood. Was that where he disappeared to right after the attack? Had he dived after the wraith? Their eyes connected—Io flushed and dragged hers back to the woman.

"What do you see, Miss Ora?" Bianca asked.

Up close, in the dazzling light of daybreak, the old woman's lips were deep purple, bags sagged under her yellowing eyes, veins inked her arms in blue, and flakes of dead skin dusted her clothes and hair. She looked like she was decomposing, a body with no life inside it, a dead woman walking.

Io went into the Quilt, hoping against hope that she had been wrong. That it had been a trick of the light. But there, in the old

woman's hand was the severed life-thread. Giving her a wide berth, Io circled her for a closer look. The unbound thread drooped to the white carpet, pooling by the wraith's feet. Io checked its color against her own bundle of threads, then Bianca's and Edei's. It was definitely a life-thread, made of the same lustrous silver that outshone every other thread in their chests.

"What is it?" asked Bianca.

"Her life-thread is cut," said Io. "Yet she is alive. I've never seen anything like it."

Bianca, surprisingly, didn't doubt her as Ava had. "Do you think that's why she killed that man? Did the loss of her life-thread drive her mad?"

I don't know. But that wasn't the answer Bianca was looking for, nor one Io allowed herself to give. Reasons, motives, resolutions, she excelled in those. People paid good money for her rational mind, her ability to see what linked people together, both the real threads of the Quilt and those of the metaphorical sense. The facts were: a dead man, a severed life-thread, a deathless murderess. Madness was *an* explanation.

But the woman had said, *There are crimes that cannot go unpunished.*

That was motive, however mystifying.

Io asked the old woman, "What crimes did you punish them for?"

The wraith didn't reply. Since she entered the office, she hadn't stopped staring at Bianca, with what could only be described as hunger.

Io stepped in front of the mob queen, blocking the wraith's view. "They hurt you," Io guessed. Half the art of sleuthing was in fishing up the truth. "You wanted revenge."

The wraith's attention switched, pressing like a dagger on Io's throat. "Revenge is for the wicked," the woman replied. "My purpose is justice. I am its servant, and it is mine."

Io's pulse spiked. She forced herself to stand still and collect her thoughts, then spoke to the room at large. "There have been other victims?"

"Oh, you *are* good, little sleuth." Bianca shoved her hands casually in her pockets. "She killed one of my men a few days ago. She managed to escape, but not before Edei gleaned the same bit of information you did: she wanted my man to repent. But this is not the first killer we've found lurking in the Silts, spewing the words of a lunatic. The first appeared two weeks ago. Another woman, as ragged as this one, strangled a border guard to death, right in front of his family."

"Our people told me," Edei said, "that she kept saying, *Your crimes demand punishment.*"

A shiver crawled down Io's spine. "Her hands, were they bent like this?" She indicated the wraith with her chin, whose pale fingers closed around the thread, invisible to anyone but the moira-born. "Was her appearance similar, the . . . skin?"

Edei nodded. "We found the first woman dead five days later—"

"Fools!" the wraith spat.

With a horrible smile, she inched forward. Edei and the girl surrounded her at once, brass bars pushing at her chest. The redhead fumbled at the back of his trousers and produced a gun. Io had never seen a revolver up close; it was big, with a wooden handle and a long nose. It caught the sunlight, the metal glistening bright orange.

"*Let them see your weapon*, they told me." The woman spoke in a hiss. "*Let them see what's coming for them*, they said. I'm neither crazy, nor dying. I am ascended."

Faster than lightning, the wraith whipped her severed thread in Io's direction, like a lasso. It sailed across the room; Io gasped and scrambled out of the way—but she was never its target.

It happened fast: the thread looped around Bianca Rossi's throat. The redheaded boy fired the gun, hitting the wraith's torso. Bianca fell on her knees, hands around her neck, gasping for air. Edei launched at the wraith, someone shouted, furniture toppled.

Io swiped at her chest for a thread. With practiced fingers, she grabbed one, skidded on her boots across the floor, and brought it inches from the wraith's severed life-thread.

"Stop!" she screamed.

Bianca Rossi was clutching at her neck, face turning scarlet.

"*Stop!*" Io warned again.

The wraith didn't—instead, she tossed Edei off her with inhuman strength and brought her severed thread down in an arc. Bianca dropped to her hands and knees.

Io didn't know if it would work, if the severed thread was in any way tying her to life, or to whatever form of existence this was, but there was no time to wonder—she brought her thread down like a blade.

Both threads snapped. Io's hand suddenly held nothing but air. On the floor, Bianca wheezed loudly, eyes bulging, crawling away till she hit her desk. The wraith, no longer held to life by that wisp of a life-thread, toppled lifeless to the white carpet.

Bianca spoke with a raspy voice. "Nico."

The redhead, gun still pointed at the wraith, came to attention. "Yes, boss?"

"Remind me of the Fortuna's rules." Bianca was sitting on the floor, elbows on her knees, breathing in and out in deep gasps. Her neck was bruising fast, her eyes bloodshot, but she was taking this surprisingly well.

Io, on the other hand, wasn't. Her hands trembled, her breaths came out shallow, and she couldn't look away from the blood

spreading on the white carpet. *Close them, darling*, Thais said in her head. *If you can't bear to look, close your eyes*. Io did.

"No guns, no leeches, no paramours," she heard Nico reply. Leeches—the Silts name for cops.

"And why's that?"

"They're unreliable."

"What did you aim for, Nico?"

"Her head."

"What'd you hit?"

A pause. "Her chest."

"Chimdi was standing only a foot to the left." Coldly, Bianca added, "Patrol duty, two weeks, the Docks."

The upper class thought the Silts were the worst part of the city, but that was because they'd never been to the Docks. High tide swallowed them completely, special anchors letting the boats remain floating on the surface of the water. All sorts of otherworldly creatures were beached there in the morning. The stench was *unbelievable*.

"What's wrong with *you*, kid?" Bianca asked.

Silence followed.

Oh. Bianca was talking to *her*. Io forced her eyes open to find Bianca inspecting her. Chimdi, Nico, and the woman's body were gone, the door left ajar. Edei was rolling the white carpet, stained with the woman's filth and blood.

Io flexed her trembling fingers and said, "I—killed her."

"Isn't that what cutters do?"

Fury chased away some of Io's tremor. Bianca and her prejudice could go to hell. She opened her mouth—

Edei spoke up, in a calm, nonchalant voice. "By necessity, not choice."

It was more or less what Io was going to say, then finish off with a nice *screw you*.

Edei placed the rolled carpet in the corridor and closed the door. “She was already going to die,” he said without looking at Io. “Nico shot her. What you did saved Bianca’s life. Probably all our lives.”

Who was this boy? He wore the knuckles, gave orders to gang members, rolled a bloodied carpet as if putting away the dishes after dinner. But what he had said about cutters was . . . not what people usually thought of other-born.

Bianca spoke from the floor, where she still lay. “Well, little Ora, I think this settles it. Cancel the rest of your clients. I’m hiring you for the foreseeable future. You’re going to work with Edei here to bring me answers about these gods-damned murders.”

“I can’t.”

“Sure you can. I’ll pay twice your price.”

“It’s not about the money.” Io stepped away from the dark stain on the wood, away from her chaotic thoughts. “I work with scorned lovers and worried parents. I don’t solve murders.”

Bianca pulled her hair back from her Ersa-kissed cheeks. “These women are using threads to kill, and you’re the only private eye in Alante who can see the Quilt. So, yeah, I think you’re exactly the right person for the job. I can kill her. Kill the next one. But something tells me these women will keep coming.”

Io glanced back at the door. She had a decision to make: refuse and take her chances with the mob queen’s wrath, or accept and risk her damn life hunting down ghosts.

“I work alone.” She probably sounded pathetic, but she didn’t care. Her mind was full of panic, her body quivering with adrenaline. The thought of Edei—distracting her, confusing her, reminding her—while she chased murderous wraiths across Alante

was too much to handle. She had kept their lives separate for three years, and she intended to continue. If she had to do this, she'd do it alone.

"Not anymore," Bianca answered, her voice full of steel. "You do this with Edei, or you find yourself another city to work in."

A threat: how all partnerships started in the Silts. Io's fingers were itching to grab a thread and slice Bianca's surety right off her face. If she let Bianca walk over her now, the mob queen wouldn't hesitate to do it again in the future. Io knew what mob kings and queens used cutters for.

"I'll do this for you," she told Bianca, "and this alone. None of your henchmen will come knocking on my door at dawn ever again."

On her left, Io thought she glimpsed Edei's shoulders tense. *This is just another job*, she told herself. She'd get it done, stay in Bianca's good graces, then go back to her normal life of adulterers and gamblers.

The mob queen of the Silts smiled a little, almost as if this haggling pleased her. "Deal. Ey, Edei?"

He gave a nod.

"She kept saying *they*. *They told me, they said*." Bianca propped her head against the desk and spoke the question on everyone's minds. "Who the hell is *they*?"

HALF A LIE

A MOURNFUL VOICE crooned about dreams and heartbreaks as Ava combed through Io's hair. Jetta Jamil, Ava's favorite songstress, was about to release a new album, and Ava had managed to score one of the first rare vinyls before it was even out. Io knew better than to ask how—her sister had a sketchy side even Io didn't fully know.

Ava had been waiting by the door when Io returned around mid-day, after visiting Isidora Magnussen. Ava had opened her mouth, but Io silenced her with a palm.

"Let me wash first," she had said.

Io's dark curls fell almost to her waist, which meant combing through them was a singular torture. When she had come out of the shower, Ava had held up the comb like an olive branch. Now, her head in Ava's lap, Io shivered at the sensation of the comb untangling her hair, roots to ends. Jetta Jamil sang of what the sun would taste like if she wasn't afraid to burn her tongue. The song was slow, and sleep draped on Io's lids.

"Aren't you going to ask?" Ava said into the silence.

Io's eyes fluttered open. This wasn't about the wraith or the visit to the Fortuna—this was about *him*. "Tell me."

"I tried telling you a hundred times, but you never wanted to know."

Io harrumphed; that was an excuse, and they both knew it.

"Thais had pointed him out to me when he first arrived in Alante, but I officially met him when Bianca hired me about a year ago. He's Sumazi, worked construction for a while, then Bianca poached him.

He's not on the front lines, I rarely ever see him at the club, but word is he does stealth work for her, spying, keeping tabs on rivals, tracking skirmishes on their turf. He's kind of Bianca's second, I guess. To be honest, the last couple of years, you've talked so little of the fate-thread, I thought you had decided to cut it." The comb paused. "Io, do you hate me? You insisted you didn't want to know, but should I have told you anyway? Are you angry?"

No, because what kind of irrational monster got angry at her sister for doing precisely what she asked? Still, it was a kind of lie by omission, which smarted. "I would have liked to be prepared," she replied. "Are you friends with him?"

"Gods no. I wouldn't befriend your fate-thread behind your back, Io. I'm not an actual villain. But he *is* nice. He could be a friend, you know, if you wanted."

"You just told me he does the mob queen's dirty work. How can he be nice?"

"I'm not sure how to explain it. In the Silts, you know how it is, there's so much danger, all the time. People are quick to choose violence. Especially Bianca's people. But Edei avoids violence if it can be avoided."

Io guessed she'd find out herself soon enough.

"Io . . ." Ava hesitated. "That woman, the wraith. You said her severed thread snapped when you cut it, so it must have tied her to life in some way. What if it wasn't entirely severed? What if it was just frayed, like that cormorant and those freaky triplets."

A long exhale escaped Io's lips. When Io was six and Ava twelve, a family with girl triplets had moved into the apartment next door. The five of them had formed a vagrant group that summer, spending endless hours on the roof garden, making fake flower potions and walking on their hands. Then one day, the triplets didn't show

up. And the next day, and the next. On the fourth, Io and Ava found them on the rooftop across the street, in a circle above a cormorant with broken wings. Ava went haywire, screaming and batting the triplets to leave the bird alone. For a short time in her youth, Ava had been one of the rare *moira*-born who could see the threads of animals. Later that same night, sobbing into Mama's arms, Ava had confessed that the cormorant's life-thread was fraying, but the triplets had kept it alive, drawing its death out for days. Within the week, Mama had rallied the neighbors—the family was evicted.

That was Io's first and only experience with the *keres*-born, who were descendants of the *Keres*, goddesses of violent deaths. The triplets had been unregistered, as *keres*-born often were, since their kind was less likely to be granted entry into the city-nations. Their treatment was unjust, but Io couldn't help the goose bumps on her arms every time she thought of that story, of what Ava might have seen.

"Maybe," she replied. "But that doesn't explain the things she kept saying about justice—it was eerie, Ava."

"I bet," Ava said with a shudder. Io listened to the brush running through her hair, that otherworldly echo coming from both outside and inside her own scalp. "Maybe they're a different kind of cutter?"

*Moir*a-born powers stemmed from the ancient *Moirae* themselves, the goddesses of Fate. One to weave, one to draw, one to cut the threads of life. Legend said that the gods died out long before the old world Collapsed, the *Moirae* among them. But their powers survived in their descendants: whenever three children were birthed in their family line, they inherited their powers. Sisters, brothers, people outside the gender binary, it didn't matter—only the number remained unchanged: always three. The same was true of pretty much every other-born, the number of siblings dependent on the gods they came from. Their powers had been the same for centuries,

documented in folk songs and history books and transnational art. It was why people didn't stone other-born to death anymore: their abilities had clear rules and strict limitations. A severed life-thread meant death. What did it mean if the rules were changing now?

"I could ask the Nine," Io ventured.

The Nine sisters, descendants of the Muses, held court at a massive mansion in the heart of the Artisti District. Their extraordinary knowledge of arts, science, and history made them an unofficial authority on all things other-born, but their services weren't free.

"No," said Ava. It was less suggestion and more command. "They're insidious creatures that serve only their own purpose."

Io didn't disagree. Two years as a private eye and many more running odd jobs with Thais, and Io had never dared go to the Nine, even in her direst need.

After a prolonged silence, Ava said, "It's always been weird to me, how easily you can sacrifice one of your own threads to cut someone else's."

Was it easy? Io had examined the question a hundred times in the past, unable to reach a conclusion. It was easy in that it was second nature, primeval almost: she reached out and just chose one, her fingers instinctively avoiding her most valued threads. It wasn't easy in that it cost her, both her own thread and her victim's. It didn't help that Io thought of them like that: *victims*.

"I don't enjoy it," she whispered. "It was either the wraith or Bianca."

Her sister paused and softly said, "I'm glad you chose Bianca. Which thread did you use to cut the wraith's? I can't tell. You have so many."

People averaged fifteen threads, the most common being threads to other people they cared about, places they loved, objects that bore some significance. For example, Rosa—Io's best friend and the only

person who had patiently let Io count her threads—had sixteen: her life-thread, eleven threads leading to her family and friends, three to various spots in the city that were important to her, one to her typewriter, and one to her favorite pair of boots.

Io had thirty-seven. She didn't mean for it to happen. Thais had said once that Io was a hoarder. If she loved something, even for a minute, like the fish noodles at the market stall or the teacher who'd smiled at her last week, she held on to that love with tooth and claw. Most threads frayed over time and distance, but never Io's. Her love was evergreen.

"Io. This thread leads to a frog," Thais had once chastised. "How can you love a frog?"

"He's a very nice green," six-year-old Io had replied.

Thais had laughed and kissed Io's head.

But to other *moira*-born, Io must look like a mess on the Quilt. Threads shooting in every direction, close and far, all of them strong and bright. No wonder Ava couldn't tell which one Io had used to cut the wraith's thread. She flopped over and studied her threads. Long minutes passed before Io finally said, "Monsieur Poire's éclairs."

"Ah, a true tragedy."

It was. Once a thread was cut, the connection, love—or in this case, enjoyment—you once felt was gone. Something . . . *meh* was left in its place. Éclairs were Io's favorite, and Monsieur Poire's were beyond divine. But when once Io's mouth had watered at the thought of them, now there was nothing special. The thread might grow back over time, but most likely it would not; such was the risk of cutting it.

Io sighed. "There must be better éclairs somewhere out there. I'll find them, one day."

Ava scoffed. "You and your *one days*. Gag."

A full-body chuckle escaped Io. She was so tired she felt drunk. Her sister's fingers moving through her hair had cast an irresistible sleeping spell to which Io was slowly surrendering.

Several minutes of half sleep passed. Then Ava's fingers stilled. "Do you want me to let the fate-thread out, weaken it? I mean, now that you'll be working with him? I can make it so you barely sense it. So that you don't feel . . . suffocated."

That was Ava's power: she could let out threads or draw them in, hence intensifying or lessening the feeling that accompanied them. Thais had tried to convince Ava to go freelance—did she know how much they could make from the brokenhearted? But Ava always refused. It wasn't her place to decide what or how much others loved, she said. Which Io found very noble, and very useless.

What would it be like if the fate-thread were weakened? If what bound her and Edei Rhuna wasn't a chain of destiny but a soft yarn of mere acquaintance? The thought made her panic. She spent her days dealing with the threads of cheating spouses and gamblers. Was it so wrong to have this one sweet thing to cherish, a fate larger than life, a destiny beyond the laws of nature?

"I don't feel suffocated," she replied. It was only half a lie.

Ava's fingers took up their ebb and flow. "One day, Io, you'll have to let go."

But Io was already drifting to sleep.

CREATURE OF CURIOSITY

IO WOKE TO a room blotted in the purples and burgundies of the setting sun, her mind made up: the only way to get through this unscathed was to treat it like any other job.

No glancing at Edei Rhuna from the corner of her eyes. No studying the way the muscles of his back moved as he walked. No sniffs of his sweaters. No flushing when he looked at her. She would act normal, and he wouldn't know a thing. They would get Bianca Rossi her answers, and life would return to how it had been. As simple as that.

But her body had a mind of its own. Her heart beat fast as she pulled on clean clothes—black trousers, gray sweater, and boots laced up to her calves—and styled her hair away from her face in one of her mom's old blue scarves. Her breath came in shots as she made her way across the roofs—the tide hadn't come in yet, but old habits died hard. And when she climbed onto the hanging bridge to the Fortuna, its metal planks echoing like a siren, her senses heightened to the point of light-headedness.

Edei leaned against the railing of the first floor, surveying the clients coming and going through the Fortuna's main hall. It was still early for the gamblers and drinkers, but the house's crew was there, setting up, cleaning, chatting over cups of coffee. Ava was probably somewhere in the back, warming up for the night's performance.

Io noticed how the lovely shade of olive of his sweater accentuated his brown skin. How his legs were crossed at the ankles and his

fingers tapped a rhythm on the railing. In the last dregs of sunlight shifting through the high windows, he looked like a painting, both faded and vibrant, ancient and timeless. *Rein it in, Io*. She needed to calm down. She pressed her palms against her cheeks, trying to cool them. Should she tap his shoulder? Say his name? She'd kept her distance for three years. Now even the little things felt too intimate.

He must have sensed her presence: he turned, nodding once in greeting. "Marhaban."

"Hello," she said back. Like any Silts resident, Io knew a little Sumazi, and a little Kurkz, and a little Rossk. The Silts were an amalgamation of cultures, and so were its people, one of the few things that actually made Io proud of her home.

Edei spoke in a low tone, his gaze steady on her. "I've got notes on the victims and a few witness accounts if you want to see them. But I've found little on the women. Only physical description and ethnicity."

Straight to the point, then. Disappointment twinged at her core, but she couldn't blame him. She'd made it quite clear last night that she'd only taken this job to get rid of him. Gods, would she be the first person to ever get their destined lover to dislike them? A fate-thread of hate—Ava would get a good laugh out of that one.

"So, um," she asked, "did anyone recognize the body of the woman last night?"

The question was a test. The wraith had died inside the Fortuna Club, her thread sliced by a cutter. Bianca could dump the body at some gods-forsaken hole, and no one would blame her. Police officers were a nuisance in the Silts, more trouble than they were worth. But if Bianca was serious about this investigation, the police and their records were fundamentally necessary.

Edei shook his head. "Not yet. I'm told the leeches are looking into a few missing persons cases."

Io exhaled with relief. It was a complicated feeling, rooted in her own guilt. When they found out who the wraith was, she would pay the woman's family a visit. Offer her apology, for all the good it would do now.

"We can take a look at the public registry. If she was a cutter, she'll be on the other-born records. It'll have to wait for when the registry opens tomorrow, though." She paused, then added, "I'm sorry I arrived so late."

He gave a small shake of his head. "It was a long night."

"Let's go back to the apartment. We might spot something the police missed."

As they walked, Edei cataloged his findings. The first murder was two weeks ago at the Modiano Market. A Rossk chernobog-born was attacked in broad daylight while shopping with his family. One of the eyewitnesses was moira-born, a weaver, and thought the woman—younger, blond, but as ragged as last night's wraith—had a severed life-thread. Bianca and Edei hadn't believed that last part until Io confirmed it yesterday. The woman's body was found at the Docks five days later, too bloated to identify.

"A chernobog-born?" asked Io. The descendants of the Rossk god of darkness could create invisible walls that no one could cross; their twins, the belobog-born could wield light as a shield. Io had never heard of a chernobog-born this far south; their powers worked better in the long nights of Rossk.

"He used to be a border guard. Rumor is his lifelong stash of bribes and payoffs led to early retirement and a life of luxury." Every city-nation was walled, and every wall had its cracks. "Bianca occasionally did business with him."

"How was he killed?"

Edei's voice hitched imperceptibly. "It's uncertain. There are

strangulation marks around his neck, but witnesses report the death was fast, as though the woman snapped his neck. Same with the second murder.”

He launched into the second murder: he had been in the Fortuna overseeing the delivery of a new shipment when he heard Minos scream. He ran outside, and the silver-haired wraith was circling Minos with her fingers all clawed up. Talking about justice and penance. Then her hand arced in the air, and Minos dropped dead. Edei went after her, but the tide was coming in, and she managed to escape through the streets.

“What did Minos do for Bianca?” Io asked.

“‘Protection’ is the best word for it. Minos and his brother Grizz were in charge of securing Bianca’s commodities. They’re dioscuro-born.”

Also known as Gemini, the Dioscuro were the twin gods Castor and Pollux, patrons of sailors and travelers. Their descendants, the dioscuro-born, were twins with the ability to track both the paths one had traveled and those one would travel. Much like moira-born, they used something akin to the Quilt, but instead of threads they saw pathways on the ground, alit in bronze. The eldest saw the paths taken in the past, the youngest the paths to be taken in the future.

Io had heard of Bianca Rossi’s twins. The mob queen of the Silts had started in “acquisitions,” otherwise known as smuggling. She procured and sold the kinds of things you couldn’t get in an ordinary shop: medicine, machine parts, rare art, old-world remnants, even services. You wanted a pre-Collapse oak cabinet? Home remedies made from the bones of leviathans beached on the shores of coastal cities? For the right price, Bianca was your girl.

Her slow, meticulous rise to her throne of shattered jaws was owed partly to her own wits and partly to the twins. If her runners strayed

on their way back with the acquisition, Grizz knew. If a buyer was about to run off with both the money and the goods, Minos knew. Bianca took care of the rest. After the Riots, she began investing her earnings in the Fortuna Club, hiring new members, opening new parlors. By the end, the little smuggler girl had taken over the Silts.

“What was the delivery you and Minos were overseeing?” asked Io. “Could the wraith have been involved?”

He glanced at her from the corner of his eye. “The wraith?”

Io shook herself at the memory of the flaky skin, the smell of decay. “I mean the woman last night.”

He made a quiet grunt. “The shipment was spirits from our suppliers in Nanzy. None of it was harmed during the attack. She never so much as glanced at it. Her focus was solely on Minos.”

“Did you get the impression he knew her? Or she him?”

“No. Grizz—his twin—was there, too. He said they’d never seen her before.”

They turned onto the North Walkway. No outliers were tolling passersby today, but it was still early. Io watched the tide consume the paved streets below, a tongue of dark blue licking back and forth at the stones. The first tide bells began ringing across the city, but storefronts and ground entrances had already been boarded up. As the southernmost district, the tide hit the Silts first and traveled up through the rest of Alante. In an hour, the water would reach five feet. During neo-monsoon season, it was known to rise to fifteen.

“What of the victim last night?” Edei asked when the bells receded.

Io told him: she had been hired by Isidora Magnussen, who had recently begun suspecting her husband wasn’t actually attending the grace-born support meetings he claimed to be at every week. His office specialized in investments—“cons” was the better word for it—Io had found out early in her investigation. She suspected Jarl

influenced his clients to invest using his grace-born powers.

Yesterday, Io had arrived at Isidora's just as the officers were leaving. "I'm sorry," Io had started saying, "I tried to save him—"

She was silenced by the woman's bosom, against which she had been squished. "You poor girl," Isidora had sobbed. "You're too good for this wretched world."

Io most certainly was *not*, but the embrace was much appreciated.

Edei's gaze fixed on her as she spoke, still and focused. Self-consciousness took over Io's thoughts. Was she slouching? Did she have new pimples? Was her hair sticking out? Then she chastised herself. *You don't care, remember? This is just another case, a partner you have to work with.* It didn't matter what she looked like.

They reached the roof of the apartment building and started down the stairs. It was strange to see the place again: the taped-off door, the dark stains on the door frame. The narrow corridor seemed far shorter than last night, when Io had been running for her life.

"A corrupt chernobog-born, a dioscuro-born smuggler, and a grace-born con man," Edei said. "The population of other-born in Alante is one in a hundred. It can't be a coincidence that the three men targeted were all other-born."

"Or how they were all killed: this unnatural strangulation," Io said. "The officers last night found similar markings around Jarl Magnussen's neck. It's easy to latch on to the wraith's appearance and disoriented musings and file this case under 'don't cross a woman.' But her last words were: *Let them see your weapon, they told me. Let them see what's coming for them, they said. They said: there is someone behind this, guiding this woman, and we must assume the first one, too. Telling them what to do and say. Perhaps who to kill. It doesn't feel arbitrary to me. It feels like . . . dogma.*"

"What does the word mean, 'dogma'?" Edei asked. His accent

was subtle, his Alantian perfect, but this was a word even native speakers might not fully understand.

“A belief system. Like the principles of a religion.”

“I am ascended,” he quoted.

She’d been thinking of that very line the wraith had said last night. Edei Rhuna went up a notch in her estimate of both him and his investigatory skills.

“Exactly!” she said, perhaps a little too cheerily.

His lips quirked in a soft smile as he leaned over to examine the lock on the door. It creaked open at the barest touch of his fingers. Inside, a man was standing in the living room, scrawling furiously in a notebook. A heavy camera was slung across his back. Edei’s fingers immediately jumped to his brass knuckles, but Io pushed his forearm down.

“Xenophon Atreidis,” she said, ducking under the police tape. “I should have guessed the vultures would be the first ones on the scene.”

Xenophon glanced away from his notes just long enough to scan her and Edei up and down. He was a short man but built like a wardrobe: big and sturdy and unbendable. His face was a jump back in time; Io was suddenly sitting at a school desk, exchanging notes with her best friend Rosa, while Xenophon was trying to get the teacher to notice their illicit activities. They were both older now but wore the same expressions on their face as they had back then: Xenophon one of contempt, Io one of open dislike.

“I’m not the vulture here. It’s your kind that’s been lurking around this apartment the entire day.” With his pen, Xenophon indicated out of the window, to the arched bridge connecting the roofs across the street.

A figure sat there, an old man hunched over the railing. The distance didn’t dim the glazed-over expression on his face, or the specks of

red swimming in his eyes. As silver reflected in Io's irises when she was in the Quilt, so did scarlet gleam in the eyes of a keres-born when they were using their powers. The old man must have been drawn here by the violent death of Jarl Magnussen.

Xenophon peered around her at Edei, standing by the entrance. "I didn't know you worked with the mob queen's lackeys now."

It was bait. Io didn't take it. She turned her back to the window and the keres-born and surveyed her old schoolmate. "What are you doing here?"

"The same thing you are, I suppose. I smelled a good scoop, and I came to investigate."

Glass vials and lipstick tubes were scattered along the corridor, and the air was scented with strong perfume. There was no hint of blood in the living room, but Io remembered where the body had lain, neck twisted, eyes unseeing. Where Nina had cowered behind the now overturned armchair. Edei began sorting through knickknacks around the room, while she stepped closer to Xenophon, shamelessly trying to decipher the contents of his scribbles.

"What'd you find?" Io asked. She was not above snooping; beggars couldn't be choosy.

"You can read all about it in *The Truth of Alante* tomorrow."

Gods, this guy was asking for a good punch to the face. Six years of school, one more of running into him during jobs, and it was a miracle she hadn't obliged him yet. Quite frankly, it was owed to Rosa, who thought he wasn't even worth the effort to raise her fists.

"Another think piece on the dangers of unsupervised cutters?" she asked. "Have you ever considered how much trouble you're raising for folks who've never done anything wrong besides being born with a power you can't even begin to comprehend?"

"I don't raise trouble; I merely report on it." He folded his notebook

into his coat and gave her a putrid smirk. “But no, I won’t be writing about other-born at all. Much more important business here.”

Involuntarily, Io scowled. The jab was directed at her, with the singular self-assurance of a man who knew more than you. What had Io missed and Xenophon caught? Oh. *Oh*.

“You don’t think the women were other-born?” she guessed.

Xenophon looked very satisfied with himself. “You assumed they were. Who’s prejudiced now, huh, Ora?”

“She had to be. She held the thread in her hand—I saw it with my own eyes.”

“What if I told you that the police have found the women’s names and are refusing to release them to the press?”

“There are hundreds of other-born in Alante; we’ll find her tomorrow when the registry opens.”

“Good luck with that,” Xenophon said in singsong; Io had to physically keep her fingers from balling up. “The day after the chernobog-born’s death, all other-born records were pulled from the public registry. Coincidence?”

“But that’s illegal.”

At the end of the month-long Kinship Treaty negotiations sixty years ago, the other-born delegation, led by the Agora of the horae-born, had conceded to a compromise: they would receive citizenship rights in all city-nations in exchange for several precautions, such as lower wages, special restrictions to rent and own property, as well as their private information made public. Their names, affiliations, and powers would be listed in public records for everyone to see. People had a right to protect themselves, authorities said. *Bullshit*, Thais always argued. *It’s us that have had to protect ourselves from them*. But other-born were tired of being emigrants, seeking shelter from city to city, and so they accepted.

"No shit, detective," said Xenophon. "But as of a week ago, Alante is the first city under the Kinship Treaty that made other-born records private. Guess who confiscated them."

Io waited, eyes hard, jaw set. This had a bad smell all about it.

"Come on, Ora, don't ruin it," Xenophon whined. "Guess."

She truly hated the boy. And he *was* a boy, large as a boar, but more juvenile than a toddler. She would *not* indulge a child—

"The Initiative," Edei said, straightening from the dresser he had been going through.

"Ding, ding, ding," Xenophon mimicked ringing an invisible bell. "Edei Rhuna, is it? Witnesses say you were here yesterday. Got any comments for me?"

Edei ignored him, speaking to Io instead. "The Commissioner, Luc Saint-Yves. You've heard of his Initiative?"

Sure she had. Everyone in Alante had heard of the golden boy's brilliant idea. Barely thirty-five and yet he had been appointed Police Commissioner and swept the city off their feet, both the distrustful middle-class and the snobbish elite of the Hill. This year, he was vying for City Mayor, the elections to be held in a few days. He was ahead at the polls mainly due to his Initiative for the New Order. In many ways, it was unoriginal: a task force that would capture and indict the city's most notorious other-born criminals. But the Initiative aimed to recruit solely other-born, when no other-born had ever been hired in the police force before. An impossible idea, yet Saint-Yves had proved determined, charming, and a little bit cocky, claiming he already had several "noble" other-born in his employ, led by none other than his moira-born girlfriend.

"Why would the Commissioner pull all other-born records?" Io asked.

The question was addressed to Edei, but it was Xenophon who answered. "Get it yet, Ora? This reeks of a good old conspiracy and *The Truth of Alante* is on its tail. And lucky me, I've got someone on the inside working on it."

The police were withholding the wraiths' names. As well as confiscating the public records that could identify them. Much to Io's chagrin, Xenophon was right: this had all the tells of a cover-up. The gears inside Io's head began grinding, thoughts tumbling over one another into an avalanche of an idea.

"So what we need," she said, pondering, "is probably sitting in a box somewhere in the police headquarters?"

A moment of silence, then a tight huff heaving Edei's chest. Was that a . . . laugh?

"First day on the job, and this is what you want to do?" he asked. "All right. Let's try it."

Io's breath caught in her lungs, like his laugh was a hook and she a starving fish. He couldn't possibly have guessed what she intended to propose; she hadn't even said it aloud! And if he had realized her absurd plan, why on earth was he agreeing?

"Really?" she asked.

"Really. It's mad enough that it might just work." He gestured at the door with a half bow, like an old-timey gentleman. "After you, boss."

With a jolt, Io realized: she had been misidentifying her body's reaction all day. For three years, she had done everything humanly possible to avoid him. Now she had an opportunity, however involuntary, to finally study him. To see what destiny had written for her, to see if she would choose it for herself. She was a creature of curiosity and he an exhilarating new mystery to solve.

She wasn't nervous. She was *excited*.

“Wait,” Xenophon called as she walked around him to join Edei at the door. The knowing smirk was wiped from his face. “Whatever you’re planning, I want in.”

“Trust me,” Io said in lieu of goodbye, “you don’t.”

This was the difference between a respected journalist with a source on the inside and two sleuths from the very bottom of the Silts: *they* had both the means and the guts to break into the police headquarters.