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NIGHTS of SIN
MATTHEW COOK

Nights of Sin

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For Jen—
Dedicated first-reader...
Keen observer...
Extraordinary friend.
This book would not exist without your inspiration.
Thank you.

You stand in front of a million doors

And each one holds a million more

Corridors that lead to the world

Of the invisible—Kate Bush

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CHAPTER ONE

The cold is winning.

Snow descends from the dull gray vault above, whipped into a swirling maelstrom by the rising wind. Icy gusts cut through fur and leather like razors.

The cold, the insidious cold, slides phantom fingers into every fold, every crevice. My feet, wrapped in rags and laced into my sturdy boots, are distant, dim things. My hands are blocks of ice inside my fur-lined mittens.

Lia and I struggle against the gale, arm in arm. I know that should we become separated she will instantly be swallowed by the blowing curtains of snow. If that happens, I fear I shall never see her again.

Together we stumble up a gentle rise. It seems as steep as a mountain to our tired legs, pulling and pushing each other in turn. We reach the top. The ground beneath my feet and the sky above are smeared into a single featureless monotone. The snow shrouds any last trace of the path we have been following.

"This is no good! We need to find shelter!" I shout, loud enough to be heard over the wind. If we press on we might stumble over an unseen cliff or into an invisible crevice. We have been lucky so far, but I know if we press on blindly, sooner or later our luck will run out.

Lia nods, the gesture scarcely visible through her hood, but says nothing. I feel her shivers through the layers of cloth that envelop her.

I turn aside. If we are where I think we are, there should be cliffs nearby, many with sheltering caves. I have only ever seen them at a distance, but Rory came this way often and told me all about them.

If we are where I think we are. It is a frightening uncertainty in the face of the storm.

I curse myself as we struggle up the next slope. I saw the signs of the coming storm, smelled the snow on the wind. It would have been safer to wait and see how bad things got before committing us to the crossing. But this late in the summer, I knew this storm might be only the first of many.

The mountain passes, the only way down to the lowlands, could be blocked for months. If we don't make it across now, our journey to the Imperial City might be delayed until spring.

Inside, deep within my mind, my sister's spirit shifts restlessly at the thought. She does not voice her displeasure; there is no need. The idea of putting off my revenge for so long a time is unthinkable to us both. No, we will press on. The caves must be nearby.

We keep walking. The wind is now at our backs, which is an improvement. It seems to push us along, up, always up. Time passes, measured in gasped breaths and shuffling footsteps.

Despair settles over my heart as we top yet another hill. The cliffs have not appeared. Lia stumbles, dropping to her knees. This is not the first time she has fallen. I try to pull her to her feet, wondering if this time she will refuse to rise. After a struggle, she totters upright.

I lean towards her. "The caves are close!" I shout, hoping the words are not a lie.

"I am ... sorry," she pants. "I cannot ... I am so cold ... Go ahead and ... look for the caves. I will ... stay here..."

I shake my head. "I'm not leaving you. Whatever happens, it will happen to the both of us. Now *move!*"

I give her arm a desperate yank and a moment later she groans and struggles forward. If I were religious, I would thank the gods. I would pray to them for strength, or for a break in the clouds, or for the smallest glimpse of the caves I so desperately hope are nearby.

But I am not on speaking terms with the higher powers. Asking them for assistance, after the monstrous crimes I have committed and after the oaths I have forsworn, would be worse than folly. For all I know, the storm was sent as an instrument of their capricious justice.

The wind shifts, turning its wrath directly into our teeth. Needles of ice sting the skin around my eyes, drawing forth tears that freeze on my numb cheeks. I brace myself, leaning into the punishing gusts.

Without warning, the swirling mists part, and there, just a few dozen paces away, are the cliffs. The sight of their jagged faces evokes a smile. I turn, and see Lia gazing at them as well.

Together, we continue the ascent. The promise of shelter sends a jolt of fresh strength into my half-frozen limbs. Minutes later, we stand at the cliffs' base. The wind drops close to the stone, baffled and shredded by the deep folds of rock.

We search, and soon find a shallow depression. It is not a cave, but it serves to shelter us from the worst of the wind. We sit, huddled, arms wrapped about each other for warmth. Lia's shivers rack her slender frame like tiny earthquakes.

"This still won't do," I say, pulling down my ice-encrusted scarf. "We need a proper roof, and a doorway we can seal with our packs, or with snow. If we don't, the cold will kill us. I will find something, I swear it. Do you understand?"

Lia stares at me for a moment, brows drawn down, as if she does not comprehend why I mean to take us back out in the storm. Then, she nods. Rising and helping Lia takes all my strength, and I realize that the next time I stop I will not be able to repeat the effort.

I push aside the thought. No sooner do we stumble from the meager shelter than the wind renews its assault, almost knocking me from my feet. I cannot feel anything but a vague numbness below my throbbing knees. My wrists ache abominably.

I have seen the results of frostbite: the blackened fingers and toes, the terrible infection that follows. The misery. The death. It may already be too late.

The thought sends a bolt of fear through me, momentarily stealing away my breath. Without my fingers, I cannot wield my bow. Without toes, I cannot march against my enemies. I will be crippled and useless, worse than dead.

Still grasping each other, we stagger along the cliff face. Lia's eyes are downcast, fixed on the snow. Mine roam over the stone, searching, searching. Gods damn it, where are the caves? Lia stumbles and nearly falls; would have fallen if not for my arm.

We cannot go on. Best to carve out a rude hole in the snow than to stay out here in the wind. It is what I should have done more than an hour ago. Then, I had the strength. I might have counted on Lia for help. But I can tell she is at the end of her endurance. If there is digging to be done, I must do it.

For the barest moment, I think about my monstrous children, the fruit of my forbidden knowledge. I called them my "sweetlings," but no one else would use such an endearment. Terrible engines of destruction, unstoppable and implacable. They would not feel the cold, save as a stiffening of their

already dead flesh. Such work would be child's play for them.

No. I shake my head, commanding myself to not think of them. Even if there were a corpse nearby from which to summon one of my dark children, I would not, even if refusing to do so meant my own death. Nothing good can come from raising the dead; I know that now. My own son paid the price for my wicked knowledge, and I have sworn that no innocent shall ever pay it again.

I stop and turn Lia, forcing her to look at me. I open my mouth to speak, to tell her we must dig for our very lives. Before I can utter the words, the blowing snow parts behind her, and I see a dark shape, low to the ground.

It is a faded, splintered thing. A six-armed cross of bleached wood adorned with the tattered remains of eagle feathers, half-buried in a drift. I recognize it instantly; realize what it means.

We are saved.

"Lia! Lia!" I say, shaking her. My voice is a whisper; the wind has snatched my breath away. "Come on, Lia, just a bit further. Just up there, I swear it."

She nods and allows me to push her along. Her lassitude would terrify me if I had the luxury to think on it, but I have no room for any thoughts beyond those of shelter.

Past the marker, I see a shadow, half-concealed behind a boulder. Dry scrub has been piled before the cave mouth; a simple screen. Removing it leaves me dizzy and breathless. Lia slumps against a nearby stone, unconscious or merely sleeping, I cannot tell.

I make a small opening, just large enough to squeeze through, then slip inside. A narrow fissure extends back into the stone. I consider drawing my knife, then decide that removing my mitten and fumbling inside my leathers will be too much effort. The still-intact screen at the entrance gives good odds that no animal has blundered inside.

Fifteen steps later, the shaft opens into a low-ceilinged cave. It is dry, but still numbingly cold. I see piles of wood, neatly stacked between simple pallets of evergreen branches. A ring of stones in the center of the floor forms a fire pit. I squat above it, tugging off one of my mittens with my teeth. The coals are dark, long-dead. Nobody has been here for days, maybe weeks.

My breath wreathes my face. Out of the wind, the cold is bearable. If I can get a fire going, it will warm us readily enough.

"Lia, we've made it," I say, not having to feign the happiness in my voice.

Despite my numb fingers, I manage to start a fire in the stone ring. When the flames have caught, I help Lia with her coat and gloves. She resists me, feebly.

"Let me be," she mumbles. "So tired."

"You must get warm," I insist, my clumsy fingers struggling with her gloves. The leather is stiff with melting ice.

I pull them off and hiss at the sight of her hands. They are waxy and white. Lia moans as I grasp them, massaging them gently. The skin is stiff and very cold.

"Lia, we must warm your hands right away," I say, trying to keep my voice calm. "The cold has begun to get inside of you. Tuck them under your arms until I can heat some water."

Lia follows instructions, dully, like a sleepwalker. I open my pack and begin to dig, looking for something to melt snow in. I uncover a battered tin pot. The fire will help, I know, but the best thing right now is warm water. It will coax her blood back into her fingers, hopefully before the frostbite can do its evil work.

I pause, the pot in my hand. An idea comes to me. I scowl and look over at Lia, shivering beside the small fire.

I must get her blood flowing.

I drop the pot with a clatter and kneel at Lia's side. I grasp her hand in mine, staring at the stricken limb with unblinking eyes. I have never done anything like this before, have never even considered the attempt. Worse, I have sworn, to myself and to others, that I would not call upon my forbidden talents ever again.

The memory of other soldiers I have known, victims all of frostbite, pushes aside my dread, replacing it with a different kind of urgency. I remember them, fumbling with cups or with their pipes, struggling to complete the simplest tasks with hands bereft of fingers. Remember faces hideously scarred, missing noses, cheeks pitted with sores which never managed to heal. Remember some of them dying, overwhelmed by gangrene.

No. I cannot allow that to happen. I will not. Not to Lia.

Silently, I call out to the blood magic sleeping in my belly, and feel it responding, uncoiling hot tentacles inside of me. The sensation evokes a bone-deep loathing, and I bite back nausea. I have not called upon my power for weeks. The last time I did, the last time I unleashed the crimson thirst, many Mor died, along with one other.

Along with my infant son. The inhuman power of the Mor, drawn into my body through the power of the blood magic, went also into him as he was struggling to be born. It killed him. I killed him.

After, when my son's tiny body was in the ground, I promised myself that I would deny it. That I would keep the oath I swore to myself to never use my forbidden knowledge. Now, that knowledge is Lia's best chance. I cup her chin and raise her face to mine. Our eyes meet.

"Kirin...? Wha—" Lia breathes, flinching away from my black-eyed gaze.

I hold her face in my hands. "Shhh. Stay still. I'll make things better. I promise. Trust me."

She hesitates, then nods. I feel her relax. She still trembles, but from the cold alone. I am as ready as I will ever be.

The blood magic flows from my body on unseen tendrils, bridging the space between us. They are ravenous, brutal things, made to rip, and tear, and drink. I struggle to control them, to force them into a new purpose.

In my mind's eye, through the lens of the blood magic, I see the ebb and flow of Lia's pulse. Her veins stand out against her flesh, limned in rose-tinted light. Her heart is a crimson star, pulsing in her chest.

Her hands are dark, lifeless. Her body has constricted the delicate vessels leading to her hands and fingers. The blood does not flow there. I look down and see that her feet are similarly dark. Without blood, the flesh has begun to succumb to the implacable cold.

I murmur a brief thanks to my mistress; if not for her teachings, and her wondrous books, the map of Lia's life would be unreadable, incomprehensible. With my healer's wisdom, however, mated to my

sanguine power, there is hope that I can reverse the damage the cold has wrought.

I will the hungry tendrils away from Lia's fluttering heart, then force them outwards into the damaged limbs. They flow down her veins and through her flesh, all the way down to her half-frozen fingers. Vessels are pushed open, admitting streams of life-giving warmth. I see the slack fingers twitch, then curl slightly. Lia's expression darkens.

"It hurts," she whispers, then louder, "It burns. Kirin ... I ... Oh, gods, it burns!"

She raises her hands and shakes them, as if to dislodge the stinging thing which torments her. She stares, but of course there is nothing there; the power is working from within, invisible to mortal eyes.

Her moans escalate to screams, short, sharp barks of savage pain. I feel my control of the blood magic slipping. It is so hungry, mindless and primal, knowing only that it thirsts. If I slip, even for a moment, it will tear out her life by the roots in a welter of blood.

"Lia, be *silent!*" I say through clenched teeth. "The pain is a good thing. You must be still. You must trust me!"

Lia frowns but quiets her sobs. Tears roll down her pale cheeks, but for the moment she has mastered her fear.

I see with my enchanted eyes that Lia's hands are warming. There is damage, at the tips and in the joints, but it is minor. As I watch, I see the torn flesh mending, slowly and no doubt painfully, but mending nonetheless.

"Kirin! I ... it is stopping. The pain is going away," she says, her eyes widening in wonder. The flesh that was but minutes before pale and mottled is pink now, the color of health.

"I'm sorry, but I'm not done yet," I say, turning my attention lower. Sweat rolls down my face, stinging my eyes and dripping from the point of my nose. It takes all of my concentration, all of my flagging will, to force the blood magic down, past her heart and lights, through the arteries running like mighty tunnels down her thighs, then lower still, into the chilled feet.

Lia moans once more as the tingling resumes, borne on a flood tide of blood. I see her fighting to remain still, to quell the sobs that tear at her. She is so brave. So brave.

Soon her feet are suffused with the same rosy glow as her hands. The damage is worse there, particularly in her toes, but I can see the tissues mending. With luck, I was quick enough to spare her the agony of gangrene.

I grip the threads of my magic and pull them, gently, back into myself. It resists, screaming defiance. It yearns to hook into the very fibers of her life, to pull it bodily forth, through nose and mouth, through eyes and other tender places.

We struggle, the blood magic and I, a silent battle held within my mind. For a heartbeat, I fear it will slip loose, will rampage through Lia's body, but an unexpected surge of fresh strength washes across me, ennobling me.

I grasp the tendrils with renewed vigor, bearing down with all of my remaining might, and pull. Slowly, so very slowly, it relents. They release their barbs, withdrawing from where they have tried to root. It keens its silent frustration, crying out with thwarted hunger, but it relents nonetheless. Defeated, it slips from Lia's body.

I slump to the chill stone, every muscle trembling. *Well done*, my sister's spirit whispers inside my head. *For a moment there, I feared you would fail.*

"You ... helped me," I whisper, remembering the unexpected strength which bolstered me.

As I always do. So long as you do the right thing, I will always assist you. Always give you what I can.

Then Lia is there, beside me, lifting me from the cold, unyielding floor. Her hands are healthy and pink, spotted with tiny, inconsequential chilblains. I close my eyes and let my body relax, drinking in the fire's warmth.

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CHAPTER TWO

We shelter in the safety of the cave as the storm rages outside. The tortured wind howls across the cliffs, spending its fury on the impervious rock, lashing it with icy whips. The storm dims the sky, turning day into twilight. After a time, the feeble light dims further, into night.

I husband our supply of wood; the cave is well provisioned, but I do not know how long it will need to last. Fortunately, the cave is set deep into the sheltering stone, and a small blaze is sufficient to keep us snug and warm.

"I have never heard of M'ash-vos," Lia says, looking up at the simple six-armed cross adorning the cave wall. It is the same shape as the half-buried marker outside.

"That's because you grew up in the City," I reply, stirring the cook pot. A barrel in the corner of the cave has yielded a scant harvest of dried apples and other vegetables, which now soften in melted snow. "M'ash-vos is a rural god, the patron of byways and travelers."

"And there are places like this all over the north?"

"Aye. They are his places of worship; his only church. The god's followers are called upon to provide whatever succor they can to those who walk the roads."

I sit back, sighing with contentment. The radiant heat from the fire soaks through my woolen hose, warming my toes. Delicious steam rises from the pot, curling in the air. We have shed our outer garments. They are spread beneath us, insulating us from the chill stone.

"Don't feel bad," I say. "My own childhood was spent in a small community, farmers mainly, as well as those who did business with them, and I never heard his name spoken either. It was Rory who first told me about the god of wanderers."

Lia cocks her head. "Rory was your teacher, yes? The man who taught you to track and to hunt?"

I nod. "Aye. He walked these roads for nearly two decades, and knew them better than I know the lines on the palm of my hand. He showed me many such sanctuaries, scattered all along the northern range. I knew if we could just reach the cliffs, it would only be a matter of time until I spotted one of M'ash-Vos's markers."

"Thank the gods you did," Lia says softly. "And ... thank you for—"

I interrupt her, holding up my hand. "It was nothing. Please do not speak of it."

"But, Kirin, if not for you, I might have lost my fingers, or toes. What you did—"

"Is not worth mentioning," I almost shout, harsher than I intended. Lia frowns at my reaction, and I force the scowl off my face. She means well; she always means well, but this time her gratitude sickens me. I do not deserve it. If I had faltered for even a moment, and let go of my grip on the blood magic...

A shiver crawls down my spine at the thought. "Please, Lia, do not speak of it," I beg her. "I should not have even made the attempt. Warm water would have been safer."

Lia nods, understanding blossoming in her eyes. She was with me on the night that my son ... on the night that he died. She knows all too well the circumstances of his death.

"I understand," she says simply, "but I still cannot help but be grateful that you tried, and succeeded."

She moves around the fire and sits beside me. Her hip presses against mine. Even through the layers of leather and cloth between us, I can feel her body's heat. She reaches out and cups my chin, lifts my face to hers.

For a moment, I refuse to look at her. The memory of the blood magic, flowing across my gaze, unnerves me.

You are in control, never forget that. The magic will obey, if you are strong, my sister whispers softly. What happened before ... with the child ... was a tragedy, but it was also an accident. You did not mean to do harm.

"Is she talking to you?" she asks, her eyes searching my face. Lia knows about my sister, and can recognize the signs when I am listening to her.

I look up, into her eyes. There is no slick uncoiling of power, no crimson thirst. For now, the blood magic is quiet, sleeping. Lia's eyes are wide, and clear, shining with the color of cloudless summertime skies.

I nod. "She says the blood magic will obey me. That it ... that it won't ... hurt you." The words snag in my chest with tiny hooks.

"I know you would never do that," Lia says. "I trust you."

She slides her hands up my arms, resting them on my shoulders. She is trembling, ever so slightly, the sensation traveling down her limbs and into my own flesh. She strokes my neck, hesitantly, soft as the touch of a feather. I feel my face flush.

"Lia, what are you—" I whisper, even as my body responds, knowing full well what she intends. She shushes me, placing two fingertips on my lips, then trails them, delicately, across my cheek.

"I know what I am doing, and what I want," she says, tucking a lock of my pale hair behind my ear. She leans towards me. There are no more words that need to be said.

* * * *

I lie on our simple bed of piled blankets, close beside the fire. Tiny flames lick at glowing coals; it needs to be tended. I should get up and take care of it, but I do not wish to move.

Lia lies nestled against me, her head on my breast. I feel her, skin to skin, stretched along the length of my body, warm and supple and soft. I breathe in the smell of her hair, allowing my eyes to slowly close as sensation washes over me.

I hang, suspended in the moment, languid and pleasantly tired. The taste of her still lingers on my lips. For once, my mind is quiet, at peace. Then the moment passes and worry returns, gnawing like a rat at the fringes of my contentment.

It is not that she is a woman; I do not care about that. Nor do I care about the differences in our age or upbringing. All such concerns are trivial compared to the shared peril which unites us.

No, I know perfectly well the source of my concern. I scoff at falling prey to such a base superstition, even as the rats redouble their efforts, gnawing with their sharp, sharp teeth.

You are frightened because everyone you have loved, or who you gave your body to, has ended up dead, my sister whispers.

She is right, of course. She dwells in my mind; I cannot keep secrets from her, even if I would try to keep them from myself. Tears sting my eyes.

In the cave's darkness, I can almost see my sister's ghost, sitting next to me beside the fire, her pale hair and heart-shaped face, identical to mine in every detail. Kirin, my twin, the woman whose name I took for my own, the soul I called back from the lands of the dead and brought into my own body, so many years ago. One name for two joined souls.

"Yes," I whisper back. "All are dead. Some by my own hand. All save Urik and he..." A fist seems to squeeze my heart. I cannot say it.

He is still out there. Somewhere. And he has sworn to kill you when he finds you, she finishes for me. Tears roll down my face. Urik, my husband, the man who beat and humiliated me, a lifetime ago. The man who has already tried once to end my life.

Given my unlucky past, I suppose I can be forgiven a small measure of distrust. I have not had many lovers, but what my sister says is true. Marcus, my sister's husband and murderer. Rory, my mentor, who never lay with me but who would have, had I not used the blood magic to rebuke him. Even Jazen Tor—oh, gods, poor Jazen—the dead father of my dead son. All who have loved me, or lusted after me, are gone or, like Urik, are irrevocably broken.

I do not want that to happen to Lia. I will not allow it. I should not have let her kiss me. Let her touch me like she did, or responded with my own ardent caresses. Should not have surrendered to the sweet temptation.

Gently, I move from beneath her, slipping out of our warm nest to stand in the chill darkness. Fresh wood blooms into flames when placed on the dying coals. Soon the fire is flickering merrily once more in its ring of stones.

I sit in the flickering light and listen to Lia's gentle, ladylike snores. Outside, the wind howls and tries once more to tear down the walls of our sanctuary. I do not sleep.

The storm breaks the next morning. The cave seems smaller somehow, without the ever-present gale rumbling outside. I put on my leathers and my heavy cloak and move to the entrance. The screen is almost completely blocked; only the top foot is unburied. Lia and I take turns in the cramped passage, pushing it out until we can slip past.

The rising sun, unseen for days, draws tears from my dazzled eyes. It is shockingly cold outside, a bone-deep chill that freezes my lashes and the tender flesh inside my nose. I pull my scarf higher and adjust my mittens.

Everywhere the world is white. Snow is piled in mammoth drifts against the stone cliff, the rounded hills sparkling like diamonds beneath a sky of flawless azure. The path is invisible, buried beneath feet of snow. Far below, two or three days walk, at least, the smooth white gives way to the mottled blacks and browns of stone and bare ground.

"I thought we had time to get through the passes before the snows began," Lia says. She hugs herself. Her winter gear is a collection of ill-fitting hand-me-downs, not as thick as mine.

"As did I. Winter will be arriving early this year, it seems. We should take advantage of this and make a break for the low country before the gods decide to throw more storms our way."

I speak the words lightly, as if in jest, but I immediately regret them. I wonder if the early snow is indeed

some punishment sent by the higher powers to hinder us. I curse myself silently for a fool; best to nip that poisonous flower at the bud before it can fully bloom. Lia shoots me a backwards glance, and I can tell she wonders, too.

"Come on," I say, wading through the thigh-high snow, back towards the cave mouth. "The day's not getting any younger and we've miles to go before nightfall."

Lia has been a good student; it takes her just a few minutes to pack her things and roll her blanket. I fill my cook pot with snow and pour it onto the coals. Burnt-smelling steam fills our sanctuary. Before I take my leave, I pull half a loaf of trail bread from my pack and lay it on the stones beneath the six-limbed cross.

"What is that for?" Lia asks.

I stare at the symbol of M'ash-Voss for a moment, silently thanking the god for his hospitality. I turn away, adjusting my pack straps. "Because we can use all the help that comes our way," I say. "And only a fool intentionally spurns the goodwill of the gods."

We make good time, despite the clinging snow. Though the air is well below freezing, the sun buoys our spirits and warms our bodies. We walk single file, more often than not with Lia following in my tracks. When I cannot breast the snow any longer, we trade places, but such rests do not last long. As strong as the trail has made the young elemental, she still lacks the strength and fortitude that my years on the road have given me.

I look back, along our trail. It is a marker I would erase, if I could. It stretches behind us like an arrow, aimed straight at our backs, screaming our presence to any unwelcome eye.

Always, I look for movement. My eyes never rest. I know the Mor might be nearby; before the snow forced us from the road, I saw many of their tracks in the damp earth. Some were very fresh, a day or two old, at most. They are inhuman and powerful, masters of rock and fire, strong beyond mortal understanding. The storm would not have driven them away; it would only have slowed them.

I call a stop when the sun is still hours above the horizon. The lowlands are nearer now, the snow line tantalizingly close, but I know we cannot reach it before nightfall. With the dark will come its mistress, the gnawing cold. I do not wish to be out in that again.

We sleep in a snow cave, dug with our own hands into the side of a drift. Our packs block the outer entrance, sealed with more snow. I light a candle. After a time, our bodies and the small flame warm the tiny shelter. Lia presses against me, our shared body warmth keeping us comfortable until dawn.

The next day dawns gray and damp. I smell snow on the air. I rouse Lia and drag her, grumbling, into the rising light. We are still too high for my comfort. All morning, fat, white flakes drift down, threatening, but never quite managing, to become a storm.

I finally relax when the black backs of stones begin to jut up through their covering of white. Soon I hear the crunch of gravel beneath my boots. After days of wind and the constant crackle of ice, the sound is as sweet as music. I spy the wayward trail in the distance, farther away than I thought it would be, and turn towards it.

"I am so tired," Lia grumbles, stopping to drink from her water skin. "How do you do it?"

"Do what?"

"March like that. You are so ... I mean to say..."

I grin, and hold out my hand for the water. "So old, you mean?" I tease, throwing my head back and taking a long swallow.

Lia laughs. "Not so old as all that," she says. "But still, I should be keeping up. It is not as if I am a weakling. When I was a girl, I hiked often along the trails surrounding my father's summer home."

"That, I suspect, was tamer country. Groomed and wrestled into civilized submission. This is a wilder place, unforgiving and cruel. You're doing quite well, trust me."

She grins at my praise, pleasure lighting her face like a lantern. *Careful now, my sister says. Even as learned as she is, and after the terrible things she has experienced, Lia is, in many ways, still a girl. Trust is one thing, but adoration is quite a different matter.*

I think about our night in the cave, bodies pressed together, hungry mouths drinking in deep kisses. Think about Lia kneeling before me, no blushing, tentative virgin but rather a skilled and confident lover, giving and receiving pleasure without shame or hesitation, and wonder if my sister has the right of it. The memory evokes a tingling deep inside, a primal, animal passion I have not felt for a long, long time.

I hand Lia her water skin, holding onto it for a moment to prolong the contact of our gloved hands. She smiles at me, and I can tell she feels it, too.

Somewhere below, a ringing note sounds out. I recognize the sound: an army signal, blown on an Imperial brass horn. It calls out in distress, summoning help.

Lia and I look at each other, then turn and hurry along the trail. The sound is close, perhaps little more than a mile; less than two, certainly. Before long, we hear the ghostly sound of men yelling, mixed with the chime of steel weapons. The incongruous smell of something burning reaches us, carried on the freezing wind.

Burning. The Mor.

No sooner do I think of them than I hear their weird, piping battle cries. Even though the smallest of the Mor stands a full three heads taller than a man, with chests deeper than wine barrels, their voices are reedy and thin, more like bird song played on a panpipe than proper language.

I fumble my bow from its place under my cloak and whip the string from beneath my shirt. It is dry and pliant, warm from the heat of my breast. A moment later the big horn and ash bow, Marcus's hunting bow, is strung and ready. I pull a broad-head arrow from my quiver and set it to the string.

I look at Lia; there is lightning flashing in her eyes. It is a small thing now, the barest hint of movement and light, but I know such appearances can be misleading.

We round a bend in the trail and see a column of smoke, rising from behind the next curve. Mor tracks are thick upon the ground, the wide, four-toed marks pressed inches deep into the frozen mud. There are many; too many.

Without a sound, Lia and I hurry towards the sounds of the melee.

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CHAPTER THREE

Lia and I run the last quarter of a mile, down the muddy, twisting track and around piles of tumbled boulders, towards the smoke and the ringing clash of weapons. The wind shifts into our faces, bringing with it the stench of charred meat. As we approach, the smell intensifies.

My stomach drops. I know that scent. It is the smell of burnt human flesh. I remember tasting it on Jazen Tor's breath on the day he died, burned from within by one of their enchanted stone blades.

The memory pushes away my fear, replacing it with cold rage. It reminds me of all the things I have lost to the Mor. Far, far too much.

We round the boulder, bodies bent, lest we silhouette ourselves against the sky. Below, the trail dips, dropping into a hollow. There, twenty-odd men—army irregulars from their tattered, mismatched clothes and simple weapons—are locked in battle with a quartet of Mor warriors. The men's commander, a lieutenant clad in the uniform and crimson cloak of the Imperial Army, stands in the van. He wields a magnificent sword, studded with emerald and jet. Human bodies litter the ground. Some are burning—shriveled, fetal shapes curled beneath columns of dark, greasy smoke. I am surprised to see that the irregulars have managed to bring down two of the Mor—their hulking bodies lie on the stones, leaking foul black blood from scores of stab wounds. These surviving men outnumber the Mor five to one, but I know that even for trained soldiers those are slim odds; what the Mor lack in numbers they more than make up for in sheer lethality.

The Mor tower over even the tallest of the militiamen. The creatures have long torsos, set atop stout elephantine legs. Their heads are blunt wedges, resembling nothing more than armored helmets. Green eyes glow in their mask-like faces, inhuman slices of sparkling jade.

Each has four arms. The upper set are massive and armored, tipped with thick, rending claws; the lower more delicate, terminating in disturbing, twin-thumbed hands. Each creature clutches a brace of stone sledgehammers or wickedly curved stone knives in their lower hands. The weapons steam in the chill air, glowing with sullen, orange heat called forth by the rock wisdom of their shamans.

Tiny bronze decorations swing from simple harnesses or from rings pierced through their bony hides. As they move, the ornaments clash together, filling her air with the sound of bells. Their only other clothing is rough breechcloths of pale hide, twisted around their thick hips. Their skin is a dull gray, the color of bedrock. If they feel the biting cold, they do not show it.

The lieutenant bellows a war cry and swings at the nearest Mor, his blade flicking out from behind his splintered shield. The sword clashes against the enemy's shoulder and rebounds harmlessly from its carapace.

The Mor replies, its upper arms scything out and down. The claws, strong enough to tunnel through solid rock, crash into the weakened shield, shattering it in a spray of wood and bronze. The swordsman cries out, backing away. His shield arm dangles, certainly broken. The Mor, sensing victory, strides forward, its glowing blades upraised for a killing stroke.

Without thinking I raise my bow, smoothly drawing the arrow back to my ear. I do not stop to aim; there is no time. There is only time enough now for instinct. I let the missile fly.

The broad head strikes the Mor in its side, slotting between two of the thick armor plates. The arrow sinks almost to the fletching; such is the power of the ash bow. The stricken Mor reels back, fluting in agony.

The lieutenant's eyes widen, then flicker up towards our position. I am already fitting a second shaft to the string. He sees me, and a grin spreads across his bearded face.

"Forward!" he screams, fitting action to words. His sword thrums as it cleaves the air, back and forth, back and forth. His men give a ragged cheer and follow behind, sheltering their commander as best they can with their crude leather shields.

"Lia, that one," I say, gesturing to the rear-most Mor warrior.

"I cannot! The men are too close!" she says.

I growl, frustrated, but she is right. I have experienced first-hand the awesome power of Lia's lightning, an experience that nearly killed me. If her aim is even slightly off then the men may be struck as well.

Below, the lieutenant falls upon the wounded Mor. The mirror-bright blade finds a delicate spot, and black blood flies. He is magnificent, his swordplay a lethal dance. The Mor slips to one knee, and is instantly swarmed by the vengeful men.

Their victory is short lived. The remaining Mor pull together, shoulder to shoulder, forming a triangular wedge. As one, they plow forward, into the men's flank. Laval blades rise and fall; flesh steams and crackles. Men scream, then crumple.

I cannot shoot down into that swirling chaos; friend and foe are pressed too close together. I must separate the men from the enemy if Lia is to be allowed to bring her power to bear. Without hesitation, I stand, arms extended, exposing my position. There is no choice.

"For the Empire!" I shout. "Pull back! Retreat!" Below, all heads, man and Mor alike, swivel upwards. The Mors' eyes, glowing balefully, fix on me.

"Pull back! Pull back!" the lieutenant echoes.

The command breaks the last of the men's faltering courage. They whirl, turning their backs on the foe, running pell-mell away from the fight. The lieutenant stands his ground, facing off against all three of the towering enemy warriors, giving the soldiers a few precious moments to disengage. His courage is breathtaking.

The Mor surge forward in pursuit. Even the lieutenant's skill is no match for such power; they will simply run over him, trampling him into the frozen mud, if need be.

"Lia, now!" I scream, letting an arrow fly. It misses the mark and skitters off a Mor's tough hide.

"But, he is still too—"

"*Do it!*" I roar, plucking a fresh arrow from my quiver. The Mor raise their claws and their burning weapons. Nothing human can resist such concentrated might.

Behind me, Lia whispers a command in the sibilant language of the air elementals. The sky responds.

The air is split with eye-watering brilliance as a stroke of dazzling blue fire lances down like the finger of a vengeful god. It strikes the rear-most Mor, wreathing it in coruscating energy. From it, smaller bolts flicker out, reaching out for the creature's companions. They dance and jig, their mighty bodies contorting and twisting.

The thunderclap which follows an eye-blink later is deafeningly loud. The lieutenant is knocked

backwards, slapped aside like a child's toy. He strikes a boulder and slides bonelessly to the ground.

I flinch away, eyes shut tight. I have been struck momentarily deaf; the thunderclap's rolling echoes are muffled, as if I have cotton in my ears.

Blinking my dazzled eyes, I look down, searching for survivors. I know from bitter experience how strong the Mor are. Even the lightning may not have killed them all.

The inhuman warriors lie on the stones, their rocky hides darkened and split. Steam and foul, black ichor leak from rents in their armor. The smell that wafts up stinks of burning metal and charred fish. As I watch, one of the Mor, then a second, twitches and stirs.

"Finish them!" I call out, drawing my knife and scrambling down the rocky trail. The fleeing men stop in the road, staring at me in open-mouthed shock. With my wild, pale hair, dressed in scout's leathers and brandishing my long Ulean steel knife, I must be quite a sight. I rush past them, hoping they will follow. As I pass, some of them see my disturbing green-within-black eyes, and flinch away.

Below, the two surviving Mor struggle to rise, mortally wounded but not yet dead. So long as they draw breath they are dangerous. They must not be allowed the opportunity to get away lest they bring more of their kind.

The men come running behind me and I breathe a sigh of relief. We fall upon the stricken monsters, dancing around their feeble swipes. I kick aside one of their stone knives, cold and dark now without their rock magic to ennoble it.

"Lia, see to the lieutenant," I call over my shoulder, then turn back to the task at hand.

Even at the edge of death, the Mor are still formidable, clinging to life with surprising tenacity. By the time the last one goes down, pierced by half a dozen blades, we are all panting and breathless.

I move to a boulder and sit, heavily. My arms ache. I look down and see my hands are slicked with their stinking black blood. I mutter a curse and drag them across the stones, trying to wipe away the stain.

"How is he?" I call over to where Lia crouches beside the motionless lieutenant.

"Unconscious, but breathing. There is blood on his face."

I stagger to my feet. Lia has seen blood aplenty since we first met, but she is no healer.

I kneel beside the stricken lieutenant. Without meaning to, I open my secret eye, and instantly the map of his life, drawn by the power of the blood magic, is laid before me. I see his heart, beating strong and steady in his chest. His arm is a riot of pain; the twin bones of his forearm are broken.

I explore the injury, using my secret sight and wise fingers. I breathe a word of thanks when I see that the jagged ends have not pierced his skin; it will be hard enough to save the limb without the added complication of infection. My mistress's books were full of warnings about this silent, invisible killer, and I would spare him—and myself—the difficulty of treating such an affliction in the field. The broken bones will be trial enough for both of us.

The blood magic yearns to reach out and twist into his body, but I do not allow it. I am tempted to use it as I did in the mountains to heal the injury; if a second party of Mor were to find us, he would be at a disadvantage without a shield. But the risks are far too great. I can almost hear it whimpering, like a leashed hound scenting fresh prey, as I grasp it tightly. I will have to content myself with setting the bones properly and allow time and nature to do its work.

"Fetch me something to make a splint," I say to the men. Eight remain, fewer than the number of bodies that litter the trail. They stare at me, unmoving, as if I have gone mad. "I'll need stout sticks, and bandages. And someone start a fire; I may need boiling water, and he will need to be kept warm. Go!" I yell, snapping some of them out of their battle trance.

"Help them; you know what I need," I ask Lia. "And assign a few of the others to check the fallen. It's unlikely that any who were struck lived, but there's always hope. Those which cannot be spared..." I let the sentence trail off and she nods. Her time spent in the Mercy Tent, tending to the wounded beside Brother Ato, the priest of Shanira, has given her the bitter wisdom such decisions require.

"Who ... are you?" the lieutenant whispers. I did not know he was awake.

"A friend. A scout in the Imperial Army," I say. He groans as I tear his sleeve, exposing the wounded limb. It is swollen and dark, twisted at an unnatural angle.

He tries to rise and I push him down, making shushing noises. "My men," he groans.

"You can check on them later. You have to relax now, and save your strength. I have to set your arm."

He flops back. Greasy sweat covers his pale face. He must be in agony. "How many dead?" he finally manages to ask.

I look at the battlefield, and gasp. I realize that my secret eye is still open. Its otherworldly sight reveals the specters of the fallen warriors. The spirits linger near their fallen bodies, sightless, white eyes beseeching, mouths stretched as they moan supplications. Some call out in wordless fear, pleading with me for just another moment of life. Others keen for revenge.

For just a moment, I am tempted to grant their request, to command them to slip back into their shattered, torn bodies. Doing so, I know, would call forth my dark children, my sweetlings, from the fallen flesh. If more of the Mor arrive, drawn by the smoke and the stink of cooking flesh, then the sweetlings will be welcome allies.

Sour bile rises in my throat. Gods, no. Not again. Never again. There was a time when I looked upon my sweetlings as a mother would her own children, beloved and cherished. Since then, I have come to understand the perversity of such thinking.

With a word I send them away, commanding the spirits to leave this place and travel to the lands that await them. One by one, the ghosts fade into nothingness.

"Who ... are you talking to?" the lieutenant whispers. What has just transpired is invisible to mortal eyes. I close my secret eye and look down at him. He stares back, his handsome face drawn with pain.

"Most of your men fell to the Mor," I say. "The rest are looking for supplies. If the arm is to heal properly, I must move the broken bones back to their proper places. It will hurt a great deal. Do you understand?"

He nods, then says, "Can I ask a favor? A big man, with a purple birthmark on his cheek, wearing a leather helmet and carrying a mattock. Did he survive?"

I remember seeing the man with the birthmark among the survivors, and tell him so.

"His name is Wentz," the lieutenant continues. "He is the closest I have to a second-in-command. When he returns, can you bring him to me? I must tell him how to tend to the fallen."

"I will," I promise. "But for now, I need you to relax. If you fight me it will only prolong the pain. Are you ready?" He nods again, closing his eyes tight.

I grip his wrist with my strong archer's fingers and pull. Bones shift and grate. His face, already pale, goes stark white. He tries not to scream, but in the end the pain proves too great. His cries echo from the stones.

I work as fast as I can, but aligning the splintered ends takes time. Before I am done, the lieutenant falls unconscious once more. I hurry to finish, before he comes round.

By the time the soldiers return, bearing wood and bandages, I am done, but the lieutenant's screams still echo in my ears. I splint the arm with trembling hands and remind myself that sometimes a healer must inflict pain for the patient's greater good. When he wakes he will understand I did what I had to. I hope.

I scan the faces ringing me and see the man with the purple birthmark, Wentz. "He said he wants you to tend to the fallen," I tell him. "The ground is too hard for graves, so you will need to pile stones over them. The Mor won't disturb a body entombed in stone. Do you understand?"

Wentz nods. He mutters to the men and they fall in behind him. He walks a few paces, then stops. "What about them?" he asks over his shoulder. He points to the dead Mor.

"Leave them to rot," I say. I remember all too well the indignities that the Mor have inflicted on our dead since their recent emergence. Farmsteads burned; every man, woman and child slain. Tiny, dismembered bodies left unburied beneath the cruel sky, a feast for birds or other scavengers.

Wentz nods again and moves towards the battlefield. Soon the stone cairns begin to take shape, gentle mounds of rock. I sit beside the lieutenant and watch the slow rise and fall of his chest.

I am uneasy, nervous. I feel the pressure of unseen eyes upon me. I scan the surrounding hills, but nothing moves save the falling snow. A thought occurs to me, and I stand to look over at the fallen Mor.

The men have piled their bodies, unceremoniously, at the edge of the hollow, amongst the tumbled stones. Snow is already beginning to dust their mighty limbs. They are certainly dead. Tentatively, I let my third eye slide open. I see them.

The specters of the Mor stand beside their fallen flesh. It is the first time I have seen such a thing; whenever men and Mor have perished in the past, their inhuman souls were nowhere to be found. I had never troubled myself with their absence, assuming they either had no souls as I understood them, or that they went to some underworld reserved just for them.

Their ghostly presence shows me I was wrong. I look at their translucent bodies. They are still, motionless as statues.

They are looking at me.

Human souls never stare at me so; they almost invariably have eyes only for their lifeless former shells. When I do manage to draw their attention, their eerie voices are always filled with calls for vengeance, or with pleas for another chance at life.

Not the Mor. The Mor merely stare, fixing me with their baleful, emerald gaze. One of them, the largest of the warriors, walks towards me. He strides through the camp fire, his spectral flesh passing through the flames. A chill twists itself through my body, raising the hairs along my arms, as I force myself to hold my ground. I will not back away from a ghost.

Be wary, my sister says, her voice flat and tight. She is scared, too, I can tell. Just because no human soul can do you harm does not mean that the Mor have any such limitations. Who knows what magics they wield?

The Mor stops a few short paces away. It raises both of its right arms, pointing at me with finger and claw.

"I don't understand," I whisper. I know it can hear me. "What do you want of me?"

The Mor speaks, its strange, piping voice breathy and insubstantial. The words carry with them a freight of feelings and emotions, which roll through my body like a tide.

Anger. Rage. Disgust. Loathing. Sharp, ugly feelings, as jagged and cutting as blades. And overtop all, tainting all else, an overwhelming, blanketing fear. I flinch away from the intensity of the Mor's feelings. Beside me, the lieutenant moans in his sleep, tossing and muttering.

"Begone," I whisper, then, louder, "I said begone! I do not know what you want of me, but you shall not have it. Taint not this place with your presence. Go to whatever heaven or hell will have you, but trouble me no more!"

I feel the words rolling out, suffused with the power of command. If it were a human soul, it would be forced to obey. The Mor merely stares, slowly lowering its arms.

The others stride forward, their ghost feet quieter than a breath of wind. Soon they surround me, a circle of translucent specters. They all look at me with unwavering attention, as if marking me. Emotions buffet me, swirling currents eddying under the overwhelming loathing and fear. I feel wetness on my lip, and wipe it away. It is blood, running from my nose to drip from my chin.

"Please," I croak as the ground begins to tilt beneath me. I hear my sister's voice; she is howling inside of me, as if whatever I am enduring is far, far worse for her, but it is a distant, insubstantial thing, as if she is far from me. "Please," I repeat, unsure what it is I am even asking for.

I drop to my knees, and dimly feel the sharp stones gouge my flesh. "I don't understand. I hear you ... I feel you, but I don't know what you want. I don't understand!"

The collection of spirits watches me for a time, then, one by one, they turn aside. As they go, they fade, as if the essence of their souls were moving away at great speed to some unguessable destination.

The last Mor, the one who first approached me, lingers to fix me with a final stare. It raises its inner hands, fingers twining in a gesture, of what, I do not know, and then it, too, turns aside and fades away. The residue of its fear lingers on the air like a bad smell.

The world slowly brightens around me. Pain from my bruised knees speeds the process, until I am once more myself. I hear my sister's heartbroken weeping, quiet now.

"Sister, what—" I begin in a whisper.

The lieutenant moans once again, thrashing beneath his blanket, drawing my attention outwards. I place my hand on his forehead, shushing him. He moans when I touch him, then his eyes fly open. He sits, his hand scrabbling at his belt, grasping for the sword that is not there.

"Gently, soldier, gently. All is well," I say, wondering even as I say the words if they are completely true.

"You have blood on your face," he says.

"Just a nosebleed. It's nothing. How are you feeling?"

"I ... I dreamed of the Mor," he replies, looking this way and that. "It was so real. It ... they ... were trying to tell me something. They were so scared."

He looks at me, and his eyes go wide. "It was you they feared. They were terrified of you."

"It was just a dream. Do not trouble yourself about it," I tell him.

Liar, my sister whispers to me, venom dripping from the word.

Together we watch the men finish the cairns. The snow changes into rain.

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CHAPTER FOUR

My first sight of the Armitage surpasses every childhood story I have ever heard.

It seems as if I have known about the fortress wall forever—it always played a prominent role in my mother's many stories of the Imperial City—but still the sheer physicality of it is nearly overwhelming.

I know all of the relevant facts: how four men, standing on one another's shoulders cannot reach its summit; how its gates resemble tunnels more than doorways, such is the wall's thickness; how the entire length, running nearly ten-score miles from the shores of Lake Tywyn in the east to the coast of the Sundown Sea in the west, is dotted with watchtowers and barracks, each large enough to be considered a fortress of its own.

Even still, the sight of it, stretching like a mighty serpent, its ends lost in the blue haze of distance, is sufficient to steal my breath away. From this distance I cannot see the individual blocks which form the mighty wall; it is a thick line of startling geometric precision, its top serrated like teeth, studded with crenellations.

The main gates, named the Lion's Mouth, I remember, are made from two titanic slabs of some strange, seamless stone, reinforced with thick bronze bands. None remember the artifice that made them now, and I wonder how the City's engineers will repair the damage I see gouged upon them. The lion's head that gives the gates their name is taller than two men, made of polished brass. It glitters like ruddy gold in the wan sunlight, proud and defiant.

From my vantage point atop the last of the rolling foothills I see the sprawl of the Imperial City behind the wall, a wild tangle of buttressed rooftops and countless chimneys, studded with the gleaming domes. Spires jut upwards like the spears of giants, many topped with strange symbols. A pall hangs over the city, a great gray-yellow cloud, the legacy of a million fires. Tall stacks rise above the cloud, spewing columns of dark smoke into the air. The black clouds roll out, over the Northwatch Cliffs and across the fertile lowlands to the south, dense enough to blot out the sun.

Behind me, I hear the men toiling up the last hill. They are not silent, far from it, but I can see from my vantage point that there are none nearby to hear. The last three days, ever since we left the road, have been hard going, but the threat of discovery by some passing Mor patrol was too high to travel along the easiest route.

The lieutenant, Stathis of Brannock, orders the men to stop, then moves up behind me. His splinted arm, held immobile against his side with a twist of knotted cloth, makes him clumsy. Behind him, I can hear a second set of footsteps, much lighter and more graceful; Lia's I can tell.

"Gods, Kirin, couldn't you have chosen an easier ascent?" Stathis complains, dropping to a nearby log. He fumbles with his water skin and offers it to me, and I take it with a nod of thanks. I drink deeply, then pass the skin to Lia.

"An easy ascent is an unsheltered ascent, as you well know," I say, wiping my mouth. "Best to use what cover we can, lest a passing patrol stumble across us. The City's defenders need every man on the wall."

"Aye," he agrees, smiling. "I'm just grouching. You know full well that a complaining soldier is a happy soldier."

"If that is the case, then breaking your arm must have made you ecstatic," Lia says, arching her eyebrow. Despite myself, I laugh.

Stathis nods, an answering grin twisting his lips. "A touch for the lovely mage then, is it? Well, I suppose I've earned it. I know I've done my share of bellyaching since the mountains."

"More than your share," I answer, then laugh again at his pained expression. Gods, I have missed this, this easy, soldierly bantering. It seems like an eternity since I was able to tease and be teased in such a manner, but ever since Gamth's Pass, all my good humor seems baked out of me, like water from a fired clay pot.

The memory of that place, and the massacre which followed, stills the laughter in my breast. Lia and Stathis chuckle for a few moments more, then fall silent. Together, they follow my gaze downward, towards the great plain below.

As far as the eye can see, the rolling ground before the mighty wall has been trampled flat. Great burned patches, black and charred, surround every trace of human habitation. Blackened timbers and splintered chimneys, all that remains of what was once farms and ale-houses, of granaries and inns, rise like bones from the destruction.

Always with the Mor it is like this, this wanton destruction. It is as if the mere sight of human habitation enrages them, driving them into a frenzy. Only when every last shingle has been burned, and every stone has been rent from its fellow, do they stop.

In the distance, I see the Mor war host, a vast, shifting horde, a stain on the earth. The totality of them presses on my heart, stealing away my breath. There are thousands of them, tens of thousands, milling in scattered groups beneath the towering wall. Surely their entire nation, every able-bodied warrior, shaman and chief, has come.

"This is why the Armitage was built," Lia says, looking down on the vast assembly. "After the first Mor attacks on the City, when we were nearly wiped out as a race. The Armitage was constructed to defend the southlands under the Northwatch Cliffs. Its bones were cut from the spine of these very mountains and its mortar was mixed with the blood of countless workmen. It is their grave; their cairn and monument, and it has never fallen.

"Since it was built, the Mor have come three other times, each time murdering everyone and burning everything between the mountains and the great cliff. Three times they have attacked, and three times they have been stopped, here, under these walls."

I know all this, but remain silent. Speaking would lessen the power of her words. Instead, I nod.

"How will we reach the gates?" Stathis asks. I do not reply. He often asks questions of himself in this manner; it is his way of thinking through things. Lia however, as always, answers.

"The Mor do not understand the concept of a siege," she says. "We studied their tactics extensively at the College."

"I, too, have studied them," Stathis replies. He sounds annoyed at the interruption, but Lia presses on, oblivious.

"Then you know they will not entrench, as a human army would do, but rather will attack, every day, wave upon wave, until they are either broken or the walls crumble."

"That will never happen! Not while the men of the Imperial Army draw breath!" Stathis exclaims.

"And not while the Elemental Mages stand beside them," Lia agrees, laying a placating hand on his arm. When he has calmed himself, she continues.

"All we need do is wait. Eventually the defenders will send out a sortie, and when they do we shall rush the enemy's rear."

Stathis looks at her with wide eyes, an expression of mingled respect and fear. "Rush *towards* the Mor? All due respect, but there are thousands of them down there. What good do you think our company can do against such a force? Shouldn't we travel along the wall, to a watchtower further along?"

Lia shakes her head. "The Mor will have patrols roaming all along the wall, and you have seen the strength of even a small force. Plus we could wander for days and not find a clear gate, and I am sick to death of walking."

I see the shape of Lia's plan in my head, and find it has merit. "We won't attack them," I say. "It would be suicide. We'll wait for something to distract them. An exploratory force, or a cavalry sortie; something that will break up their formation. Then we'll press straight through them before they can turn to face us, and join forces with the defenders and head inside with them."

"Aye," Lia agrees. "They cannot risk opening the gates for a force as small as ours, but they will have a retreat planned for any force sent outside the wall. We just need to join up with it."

Stathis frowns, then nods. "I see the wisdom of it. Do they always teach such thorough battle tactics to Imperial scouts and pretty young apprentices at the Colleges?"

"That and much, much more," Lia answers. I see the first flicker of lightning in her eyes.

"Gather your men," I say to the lieutenant, rising. "I'll scout ahead and find us a place to lie low. Once I find a place large enough to shelter us, I will return for you, and we will approach under the cover of darkness."

"Gods be with you," Lia says, her hand on my shoulder. I do not have the heart to tell her the same.

* * * *

The sentries shift and speak, quietly, to each other, as the rest of the men try to claim a few hours' sleep. The company lies in the rubble of a burnt granary, sheltering behind the tumbled walls. The men have been here for hours, ever since darkness spread its cloak across the land, concealing their descent from the foothills above.

I wish we could have a fire, but it is out of the question. The Mor are only a mile distant, perhaps less, and its light would betray us instantly. So we huddle in the cold wind, pressing tight to the charred stones.

I sigh and open my eyes, abandoning even the pretense of sleep. I dozed for a few hours in the late afternoon, while I waited for the sun to go down, and I am not tired. Lia snores gently beside me. I smile; the young elemental has picked up many soldierly habits since we first met.

I rise, and her eyes open, alert for trouble. I hold out an open hand. "I'm just going to check on the sentries. Go back to sleep."

She nods and turns aside, pulling her cloak up to her neck. Her chestnut hair falls across her face, and I resist the urge to tuck an errant lock of hair behind her ear.

I keep low as I move between the sentries, using the walls for cover. There are rumors that the Mor, being underground creatures, might be able to see perfectly well in the dark, but no one is really sure. Best to not take chances.

I find the two guards, chatting quietly. They speak of their fallen companions. Tears gleam on their

stubbled cheeks, but their faces are grim, hard with resolve. They sit on chunks of stone, only their heads visible over the tumbled wall. Even as they reminisce, their eyes move unceasingly across the open ground. I exchange a few brief words with them and tell them to wake their relief, then head back to my bedroll.

The sentries' vigilance calms me. I did not know what to expect from these irregulars, militia soldiers one and all, but so far their professionalism has impressed me. Some are veterans of the Imperial Army, retired but still more than capable of taking up arms in defense of their homes and lands, but many others are simply farmers, or millers, or weavers. Then I remember that all of them have one important thing in common: they have faced the Mor and lived to tell of it. Such an experience changes people; they are no longer the men they were.

"Is anything amiss?" the lieutenant asks softly as I resume my place beside Lia. His wakefulness is no surprise; he is a trained soldier and commissioned officer, and I would have been disappointed with anything less.

"All is well," I whisper back. "The guards are all awake and alert."

"They're good men," he says, settling back.

"They have a good commander," I say. I think of my last commanding officer, the pompous Lieutenant Hollern. Stathis compares quite favorably to the memory. He is everything Hollern was not: confident rather than tentative; bold and assured, not restless or agitated, expecting and receiving obedience rather than demanding it. These men are luckier than they know to have him watching over them.

"How's the arm?" I ask. "Does it pain you?"

"Of course. This isn't the first time I've broken bones, gods know. It'll take longer than a week for the infernal throbbing to go away," he says, scratching at the sling. "I feel so naked without my shield."

"You'll have it again soon enough. When we get to the City I'll—"

I fall silent as trumpets sound from atop the wall. The martial sound, defiant and brazen, stirs my blood. Beside me, Lia rolls from her crude bed, eyes wide.

"What is happening?" she asks. "Is it the army?"

"I don't know. Maybe," I say. All around, the men are waking. I hear the muted clink of armor and the rasp of steel as weapons are checked. I scurry towards the sound, Lia and Stathis just behind me. Together, we reach the fallen stones, and peer over them.

Out in the darkness, I hear the sound of the Mor, moving. They do not call out to one another as men would; the only sound is the rumble of their countless heavy footfalls. It makes the earth tremble.

I see a line of flickering light at the top of the wall. Hundreds upon hundreds of small fires. I hear a new horn note, familiar to any soldier trained with the bow.

"It's an archer's signal," I say. "They must be readying fire arrows."

Seconds later the sparks leap into the air, each a tiny comet. A bone-chilling whistling reaches my ears, the sound of scores of feathered shafts flying through the night-dark air.

We watch, spellbound, as the fiery arrows arc upwards. They trace parabolas of fire across the black sky. As they reach their zenith, I hear a call, someone shouting commands in a strange tongue.

The air explodes as fire spreads outwards from the burning arrows, forming radiant paths in the air. Lia grips my arm, her fingernails digging into my leathers with the force of her excitement.

"Fire mages!" she exclaims.

The flames twist and bend, spiraling into a vortex of fire, then pull together, tighter and tighter, until they form a spinning ball. It lights up the night like a miniature sun, dazzlingly bright. I feel heat on my face, as if I stood near a blazing campfire; I can only imagine how intense it must be closer to the source.

The Mor give voice to their eerie hooting calls. I shade my eyes with my hand, and see the enemy, arrayed below the wall. They shift and seethe, a living tide of rock-hard flesh. The flight of arrows rains down into the mass of bodies, but if the missiles do any lasting damage, I cannot see.

The ball of flame shifts once more, responding to the calls from atop the wall. It forms a shape, a body, sinuous and lithe. I see a mighty leonine head coalesce from the twining flames, wreathed in black smoke, streaming like a huge mane. Its eyes are stars of white-hot fire.

The fire lion roars with the voice of a forest fire and looks down on the gathered host. It springs downwards, landing amongst the Mor. It is huge, bigger than any natural animal, towering over even the tallest Mor, but the enemy has vast numbers. Vast.

The fire beast strikes at the enemy with blazing swipes from its fiery paws. When it hits, the targets are covered in living flame, which flows down their bodies like water. Those afflicted often stand their ground, ignoring the intense heat. The Mor rush forwards, waving their upper claws and their stone weapons.

"How can they withstand it?" Lia gasps. "Are they indeed so mighty? How can they keep fighting, even as they are burned alive?" All around, the men mutter to themselves, echoing her question, until Stathis barks a command for all to be silent.

The lion renews its assault, cuffing the Mor aside. Flaming bodies are hurled into the night. Some do not rise, but others do, despite the terrible damage they must have endured. The fire beast turns in place, spinning to face the enemy that rings it, but always the Mor are there, stabbing at it. The press of bodies thickens as more and more of the warriors rush to assist their brethren. The lion roars again, as if in mortal pain.

I see a flicker of movement, something moving at the base of the wall. I squint, staring at the spot, and see a rectangle of blackness slide open. It is a sally port; a small door, perfectly concealed and invisible when closed. A moment later, a second one opens further along the wall.

A stream of equine shapes flows from the opening. Dozens of horses gallop out from the safety of the wall. As soon as they are clear, they shift, forming a skirmish line. The two lines converge, riding along the Mor front.

The horsemen lower their lances and sweep back and forth, along the line of assault. Even the Mor are no match for such concentrated force, and I see several ridden down, pierced by multiple lances. The Mor warriors, trapped between the rampaging fire creature and this new, more earthly threat, begin to raggedly retreat, moving away from the Lion's Mouth.

Ahead, I see the enemy ranks thinning, until large gaps appear. I see clearly the base of the wall, tantalizingly close, just over a mile distant.

"This is our best chance!" I hiss, turning to the lieutenant. "We must make a run for the sally port. Now.

While the enemy has other concerns to distract them,” I say, pointing to the still-open gate.

“Better that than try to advance in the daylight.” Stathis nods. “Men!” he calls out. “Stick close to your fellows and head for the closest gate. Not the main gates, do you hear me? They’ll not risk opening them for any reason.”

The men call out their agreement and rise, drawing their weapons. Those with shields settle them on their forearms. We form a column, shields overlapping like the scales of some enormous snake. Stathis is its head, and Lia and I trot close behind.

I glance back, into the men's frightened faces. Their eyes are wide; their mouths are bloodless, unsmiling gashes. Some grin, wolves baring their fangs in preparation of the coming fight. I feel my fear drop away, replaced with something else, a wild glee, and I realize that I too am grinning. I wonder, almost absently, how many of us will die here, beneath the implacable stones.

A few stragglers drift between our group and the sally port. They seem focused on the dying fire beast, and do not seem to know we are behind them. “Lia, we’ll need you to make us an opening. Big enough for all to pass through.”

Lia nods and begins a chant in the sibilant tongue of the air elementals. A flicker catches my eye, and I look up. Clouds roil and churn overhead, threaded with dancing lightning. I grip my borrowed short sword tight, hunching my shoulders in expectation of what is to come.

Lia's plea reaches its climax, the words sounding like the shrill call of hunting birds. I feel the hair on the backs of my arms and the crown of my head lifting. The Mor are just ahead, dark clumps of looming bodies. Lia points at the enemies before us and completes her ritual, and a moment later a bolt of lightning, branched and forked like a titanic tree, lances down.

The thunderclap which follows freezes the men in their tracks. “Hold!” I scream, hoping my voice can be heard over the rolling echoes. Lia whispers a second command, this time gesturing with both hands. Again, lightning stabs down, scattering the huge warriors like milkweed fluff.

I see them, turning this way and that, unsure of which enemy to face. A third, then a fourth and a fifth bolt streaks to earth, each one accompanied by the crushing sound of thunder.

The lightning stops. A hush falls across the battlefield. The enemy stands, swaying, stunned by the ferocity of the assault. Beside me, Lia sobs in exhaustion. I know how much such a summoning costs her.

“Run!” Stathis screams, before raising his sword and bolting forwards. I howl a wordless battle cry and follow, as the men at my back raise their voices in a savage call. Lia stumbles with us, sheltered on all sides by the screaming militiamen.

We crash into the dazed Mor like a battering ram. Stathis's sword licks out, quick as a serpent's tongue, finding the vulnerable seams in the Mor's armor. The weight of our formation pushes aside even the mighty warriors.

The sally port is closer now, but many enemy bodies block our way. I pull in tighter to Stathis's left side, striving to defend his unshielded flank, and feel the man behind me pull close as well, protecting me in kind. An enemy looms out of the shadows, and I stab out at a flailing, clawed limb. My short sword shivers against the creature's armored hide.

Then I am past, my sword swinging back, crashing into a new target. The Mor are still stunned, still milling. The lightning's glare has dazzled them, but slowly they are becoming aware of our presence. We

have but moments before they react to us en masse.

I hear a shrill piping as the enemy hoots their battle cry. All around, towering forms swivel, turning to face us.

"Forward! Forward!" Stathis shouts, his sword flashing in the firelight. Incredibly, I see a Mor go down, streaming black fluid from neck joint and belly. Stathis's sword comes away slicked with its life blood.

We push, with all the strength in our legs and backs, sheltering behind our shields, but the enemy is aware of us now. Every second gives them time to move into our path. I feel the momentum go out of the charge as resistance ahead thickens. Blows rain down, from clawed forearms or from the Mor's stone weapons, ringing like hammer blows on an anvil.

Men scream all around me as the Mor claim victim after victim. We go back-to-back, pulling together into a crude circle. I hear Lia beginning a fresh chant, but one look tells me she does not have the strength to call down the storm once more.

Somewhere distant, too distant, I hear the approaching rumble of the cavalry. Horns blow. Men shout and scream and die. The fire lion howls its fury once more, but it is too far away to help us.

The Mor crash over us like a wave.

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CHAPTER FIVE

I wake to brilliant sunshine. White curtains surround me, glowing with dappled sunshine. There is a rumble in the air, a constant background hum I cannot place.

I am in a bed. Crisp sheets and a thick duvet as white as mountain snow cover me. Above, beams of pale wood stretch across the plaster ceiling.

I move to sit up, then sink back, hissing in pain. My back and side throb abominably. I pull aside the covers and look at myself. I am nude save for thick bandages, wrapping me from breasts to hip. The thick gauze is spotted with brown blood.

I hear footsteps approaching, and a moment later the curtains part. I see an older woman, her silvery gray hair cropped short. Her eyes are kindly and mild, filled with gentle wisdom. In her hands is a wide copper bowl.

"I thought I heard you stirring," the woman says. "Good. Those bandages need changing anyway."

"Where ... where am I?" I ask. The woman pulls the sheets aside, then sits on the side of the bed. She picks up a cup from the bedside table and hands it to me. The water is tepid but delicious.

"You're in my home," the woman replies. "My name is Lauran. You're safe."

"But what—"

"You can ask your friend all about what happened; she's been at your side all day and night. She went to clean herself. Finally. Now, may I?" She gestures to my bandages, and I nod.

Lauran helps me to sit, a process which leaves me trembling and light-headed. The ache in my side deepens, stealing away my breath. I feel something wet trickling down my ribs. From around her neck, Lauran produces a set of dainty silver scissors hanging from a blue silk ribbon. She leans forward and slits the bandages with quick, efficient snips.

I hiss as she peels the bandage away. Cool air washes across my ribs. A pungent smell reaches me, the odor of herbs and something else, some medicine, astringent and faintly acrid. I look down and see a long cut running across my side. It has been stitched shut with tight, precise sutures. The skin all around the wound is swollen and red, studded with white blisters.

"It's burned. A Mor knife?"

"Aye," Lauran says, wiping my skin gently with a clean section of bandage. She prods the stitches gently with her fingertips, nodding in satisfaction at what she sees. "Not deep, gods be praised, or you would have been done for. Just a graze, but it notched three ribs. Fortunately, Mor blades are red hot, and cauterize as they cut. Helped with the bleeding."

I try to remember the blow and find I cannot. The last thing I recall is Lieutenant Stathis and the rest of the company, charging the rear of the Mor formation. The sally port was so close, but not close enough. I remember the fire lion, and the sound of the cavalry, rushing towards us in a thunder of hooves. Then, nothing.

Lauran wads the soiled bandages and tosses them into a basket on the floor, then pulls a jar from her apron. She opens the lid, filling the air with the same sharp smell that came from beneath the bandage. With gentle fingers she spreads the cool cream across my wound.

"Hold this," she orders, placing a strip of fresh cloth against my side. I obey, holding the bandage until she can wrap the end around me, again and again. She sits back, surveying her work with a critical eye, then nods.

"Too tight?" she asks, when I wince.

"No. My back hurts."

"That's likely because you've been on it for a full day and a night," Lauran says. She puts her hands on my shoulders, when I move to rise, and pushes me gently back. "And you'll be on it a while more. You need rest."

"I need the chamber pot, and my leathers. The Mor—"

"Are still at our gates. They are not going anywhere," a new voice says. "Now stop fighting your physician and follow her orders."

I look past Lauran, and there is Lia. She is clad as I first saw her, all in white silk. Her hair is up in a complex style she has not worn in months. Her skin, darkened nut-brown by weeks of hard labor done in the sun, stands out in sharp contrast to the pale cloth.

The sight of her, alive and whole, brings tears to my eyes. I hold out my hands and she moves to my side, taking them in her own. For a time, I cannot speak; all I can do is drink in the sight of her. When the urge to cry has passed, I nod to the bandages on Lia's hands. "What happened to you?"

"I fell," she replies with an abashed grin. "I ... I tried to drive away the Mor who stabbed you. I took up your sword and thrust at it. I do not think it even noticed. It reared back to strike you again, and dealt me a glancing blow that threw me down. I cut my hands on the stones." She touches her bruised cheek. "I suppose I am not much of a warrior, am I?"

"It was very brave," I choke out, squeezing her hands until she flinches.

"Those bandages will need changing twice a day for a week," Lauran says. She hands me the jar of salve. "Use this every time they're changed, until it's all gone. And be wary of the wound sickening. The young elementalists tell me you have training in the healing arts?" I nod. "Then you know the signs. Creeping redness. Pus. A sickly sweet smell. If you see any of them—"

"I will contact you, I promise," I finish for her. She nods and gathers up the soiled bandages and her bowl, then glides from the room. I settle back into the decadently soft pillows. Gods ... how long has it been since I slept in a proper bed?

Lia smiles down at me. "You gave us all a scare, Kirin," she says. "When they brought you in, they could not wake you. They wanted to leave you in the courtyard, with the other soldiers."

"I am the other soldiers," I reply.

"Not to me. My family is not without influence in the City, and although I do not like using it, I felt I had no choice."

An uncharacteristic harshness creeps into her voice. Her face is stern. I ask, "Lia, what happened?"

"They ... they were going to leave you there. In the courtyard. You were so still, Kirin. So very still. And yet they were attending to men much less grievously hurt."

"Who was?"

"The priests!" she spits.

Now her anger makes sense. "The priests of Shanira," I say. Lia nods.

"You were one of the first to be examined," Lia continues. "The men demanded that you be seen to first. The priest, he said your wound was very serious. Then he saw your eyes." She hangs her head, as if ashamed.

Of course. My eyes, black as sin. They have been this way ever since the night I avenged my sister's murder. Since the night I slipped into her murderer's bed and let loose the blood magic for the first time.

"Ah," I say. "He saw them, did he? And what did he say to that?"

"He said ... he said the goddess would not heal you," she replies, her voice hot and tight with anger. "But the goddess had nothing to do with it; the priest did not even try. Upon seeing your eyes, he hurried away, as if he saw a serpent. But do not worry; I plan to complain to the High Priest himself. I will—"

"Please don't," I say, stopping her. "It's all right, really. The salve, and some bed rest, will do just fine."

"Kirin, no! It is not right for them to decide who is or is not worthy of the goddess's mercy and healing. They—"

"Are men, human and flawed. They think that this," I point to my black eyes, "this is evidence of infernal influence. I have seen their reaction many times before."

"That does not make it right," she says, folding her arms.

"No. But I don't hold it against them." I point to my eyes. "The priests know only that this is proof of my crimes. They only do what they feel is right."

"They are wrong, and you know it," she insists, then falls silent.

I put my hand on her arm. Lia trembles with fury. The depth of her reaction touches me. "Well, whatever you did to get me here, and to get me well, I thank you."

Her smile is more radiant than the sunlight, and as warming.

"Where's Stathis? Was he hurt badly in the fighting?" Her downcast eyes give me the unwelcome answer. Damn. "How many made it?" I ask, afraid of the answer she will give.

"Four of the men made it through the gate," she says. "One died of his wounds in the courtyard before I could reach mistress Luran, and a second is in the army hospital. He ... he was burned very badly, and they are not sure if he will recover."

"Was it ... did Stathis ... how did he...?" I stammer, not sure how to ask about the lieutenant.

"He died well," Lia says softly. "Right after you were struck down, and I was thrown to the ground, the cavalry made it to us and opened a corridor. Even to the end, Stathis fought, giving us time to withdraw. I saw him kill four of them—*four*—before a Mor knife found his back. It was brilliant."

We hold each other, shedding tears for the fallen. For many, it is the only memorial they will get. So many have lost their wives, or children. Their mothers and fathers. All that was left for them was revenge. My sister's sadness radiates inside my breast, a black star, as she grieves with us.

I pull back, wiping my eyes with the corner of the sheet. "You'll show me where they are buried? I wish to pay my last respects. They fought bravely." Lia nods, wiping away her own tears.

"So," I say in a lighter tone, smoothing the spotless silk covering her forearm, "I see you wasted no time in discarding that peasant clothing."

She frowns. "I ... Mistress Luran complained that ... they were very dirty. I was going to wash them, honestly I was, but it seemed easier to just dispatch a servant to my father's estate."

"I was joking," I tell her, wondering as I speak the words if they are entirely true. Seeing her in the fine clothes, the shining material hugging Lia's womanly curves, jewels sparkling at her throat and in her hair, reminds me of the day we met in the ruins of Fort Azure. She saved me that day, loosing the lightning on Mor and knocking me unconscious. Afterwards, she held my head in her lap and sang to me as I woke. I remember worrying I was soiling her pristine leggings.

Just as then, seeing her attired in such splendid clothing makes me feel shabby and small. She is everything that Mother wanted my sister and me to be when we were girls: elegant; poised; wealthy in a way neither our father nor our rural neighbors could ever be.

Do not let the desires of a bitter, disillusioned woman diminish anything you've done, my sister says. Her dream killed me, but you broke free of that life, when you decided to avenge my murder. Never forget that.

"Can you stand?" Lia asks. I nod, answering her question and acknowledging my sister with one shared gesture. Lia takes my hands in hers. "I want to show you something."

I swing my feet over the edge of the bed and slide past the white curtains. The room beyond is small and spare, with plain, whitewashed plaster walls and a high ceiling. It smells of soap and clean linens. Sunlight streams in through the open window. The tiles beneath my bare feet are cool and smooth and immaculate.

My body protests as I shuffle the six steps to the window. Lia's hands grasp mine, ready to catch me if I fall. I look outside, into a marvel.

"We made it," Lia says with a smile. "Welcome, Kirin, to the Imperial City."

Below, the jeweled puzzle box of the city is laid out for me. It stretches for miles, a maze of tangled streets, ending abruptly at the sheer drop-off of the Northwatch Cliffs. Myriad rooftops of many colors glitter like a lady's cloisonne brooch, their lacquered tiles gleaming in the sun. Further away, closer to the cliffs, the roofs change, becoming more drab, the buildings growing smaller and more crowded. A thick pall of hazy smoke hangs over the rooftops, bearing the complex scents of cooking food and animals and exotic spices.

Lia points to the left, and I see the interior walls which separate the Imperial Palace from the rest of the city. They loom over the Gold Road, the great thoroughfare that begins at the wide courtyard behind the Lion's Mouth, then runs south into the heartlands of the Empire.

The palace is made from white marble, shining like ice under the blue sky. Pennants of imperial purple and maroon, the house colors adopted by Emperor Berthold upon his marriage to Lady Contessa and his ascension to the throne, flutter from the walls and from the lofty clock tower which demarks the palace's northern edge. Off to the side of the compound rises the tallest structure in the city, the famed tower of the Arquis Vae.

It stands out, unique even in that fantastical landscape. It is immense, rising high above the Armitage and the other buildings which surround it. Its surface is studded with smooth domes, which swell like blisters from its walls. Doors and balconies stud its exterior in unexpected places. It is not built from wood or stone; I do not know what it is made of. Some dully gleaming metal, perhaps, as if any human artifice could smelt such vast quantities. A ring of windows sparkles at its apex.

"It is amazing, is it not?" Lia asks, following my gaze.

"I've heard the stories, but the sight of it is even more..."

"Lovely?"

"Disturbing. Confusing. My mother used to tell us the tower wasn't a building at all. It's a relic, a memorial built from one of the ships that carried us here. I remember I used to roll my eyes at her when she wasn't looking; after all, how could one build a tower from a ship? Now I feel I owe her an apology."

"They say it must have been built by a madman," Lia muses, shaking her head. "Inside, furniture studs the walls as if they were floors. Doors which open onto deadfalls and vast, empty spaces mixed with cramped cubbyholes filled with long-dead machines. Every emperor or empress who has ever sat on the Iron Throne is entombed within, slumbering until the day they will be called upon to once more defend the empire. And at the summit, in the topmost room, is the home of Ico, the Imperial wizard." She points to the ring of windows.

I nod. This was always one of my favorite stories as a girl, even though Mother seldom told it. Talk of wizards and forbidden knowledge, after all, was unseemly for ladies of quality such as we. "He is deathless, advisor to every emperor since we made our pilgrimage, or so my mother's stories said," I say. "Is it true that no one living, save the Emperor himself, has ever seen him?"

"Aye," she agrees. "It is so. None are allowed in the presence of the wizard except our rightful ruler."

A wave of weakness runs through me, stealing the strength from my knees. Lia tightens her grip on my arm, catching me before I can fall.

"Mistress Luran said this might happen," Lia says, helping me back towards the bed. "You will be prone to bouts of weakness for a while longer. Rest now, and I will fetch food."

Do as they say and recover your strength, for there is much to do, my sister gently chides. The sooner you heal, the sooner you can join the defenders on the wall.

I flop into the cool sheets, wincing as my injuries protest. The room seems to sway, like a ship on rolling seas. Lia pulls the duvet over me, tucking me in as if I were a child. She leans forward and kisses my brow, tenderly.

I close my eyes and let sleep's undertow pull me down.

* * * *

Two days after waking in Luran's bed, my wound swells and sickens, kindling a fever that nearly kills me. I do not recall much of the days that follow; my world is reduced to a lantern show of looming faces and murmuring voices. I remember the sound of crying, Lia's heartbreaking sobs. It is not until later that I realize her tears were for me.

I wake in the stillness of night. The sheets are stale and soaked with cold sweat. A candle burns on the bedside table, casting its dim radiance through the room. The curtains are pulled back, and I can see Lia, sleeping in the chair beside the bed. The clock on the mantel says that dawn is still hours away.

I feel hollow, like a scooped-out harvest gourd. Sitting up is almost beyond me; no sooner am I upright than the room gives a mighty lurch, nearly pitching me from the bed. I flop back into my sour pillows, defeated.

Lia opens her eyes. When she sees me looking back at her, she rises and walks to my side.

"Welcome back," she whispers, stroking my greasy hair.

"You've spent many nights sleeping in chairs beside my sick bed since we met," I croak. My throat is swollen and raw. My chest hitches as I swallow a sob. Lia smiles and nods. Tears glisten in her eyes.

"Aye," she says, cupping my cheek. "But I do not mind. There is nowhere I would rather be."

"Liar," I say with a pained smile.

She sits beside me and tells me of the last few days. Of the healers' desperate efforts: the bleeding and the leeches. The poultices and powders. I am only a fraction of the healer that my mistress, Edena, was but I can recognize the severity of my condition. I could have died. Lia does not mention the priests of Shanira and I do not ask.

We talk until dawn tinges the sky outside my window. I have slept for days, she tells me. I am tired, but I do not want to sleep any more.

I throw myself into my recovery, pushing myself to the edge of my endurance; often beyond. By the end of the day, I am roaming the upper halls of Luran's house, annoying her staff with my endless questions and suggestions. By the end of the week, I can walk up and down the stairs without feeling faint.

The healer's home is large and sprawling, a roomy three-floor townhouse. Lia tells me that Luran is the youngest daughter of Lucas Wainwright, scion of a very wealthy merchant family. The home, and the hospital she has built from it, is the result of her years of training in the healing arts coupled with her unused dowry. Good for her in never succumbing to the temptation of marriage; at least something positive came from that money.

The garden out back is narrow but deep, surrounded by high walls. Exotic plants and flowers, brought here by countless Wainwright merchant ships from the farthest corners of the empire, perfume the early autumn air. Patients, wounded soldiers mostly, convalesce in the sunshine beside the ponds and the intricate footpaths.

At night we dine on rich meats and fresh vegetables, entertaining ourselves with war stories and ribald songs. Luran usually joins in the singing. Her voice is surprisingly bold and strong, and she always knows all of the words, no matter how risqué. Mother would be appalled.

Some of the soldiers are troubled by my black eyes. I see more than one sketching warding symbols at me when they think I am not looking: to Ur or to Loran Lightbringer, but none challenge me openly. Whenever this occurs, my sister growls her disapproval in my head, but says nothing more. I try to avoid the most fanatical-looking ones whenever I can; a confrontation would spoil the air of tranquil peace that hangs over Mistress Luran's home, and I would not spread discontent over such a trivial matter.

When I am able, I help Luran's staff, bringing my fellow patients food, or medication, or anything that will ease their pain. I change bandages and look for infection. I am often tempted to open my secret eye and see if my blood magic can aid them, but fear always overrides my good intentions. In my weakened condition, the risk of losing control is far too great.

Soon my strength is restored, and Luran pronounces me ready to depart. "You don't have to go," she

says. "I can always use more help, and I don't see our beds being empty any time soon."

Her offer touches me. It has been so long since my talents were valued, particularly by one of Lauran's skill.

My eyes travel to the window, and the sight of the Armitage in the distance. Smoke drifts from its summit, whether from some new attack or some more mundane source, I do not know. All I know is that I want to be there, fighting alongside the defenders.

"I'm sorry, but I can't," I tell her. Lauran follows the line of my gaze and nods, sadly, saying no more.

My side still aches—Lauran says that only disciplined stretching and exercise will restore me to my former condition—but I can work, and fight, once more.

I depart with many tearful hugs, from Lauran and from her staff. I will miss this place of healing. I promise I will faithfully perform my exercises and Lia swears that she will take me to account if I do not. We walk through her open front door and into the teeming streets. For the first time, I am truly in the City.

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CHAPTER SIX

I stand atop the wall.

To either side it stretches away, a river of stone and clay mortared, if the stories are to be believed, with the flesh and blood of countless workmen.

At my back is the City, the labyrinth of rooftops and spires the Armitage was built to protect. Before me lie the open plains of the north. Below stand the massed forces of the Mor. They are as implacable and awe-inspiring as when I last saw them.

As always, when they are not attacking, they stand silent as statues, only moving occasionally, just enough to remind me they are indeed alive. How they can remain motionless for so long is, like many things about them, a mystery. Their helmet-like faces are raised, green-glowing eyes fixed on the summit with terrible intensity.

I am only a bit winded from my ascent. The way to the top was heavily guarded, with many switch-backed stairwells and garrisoned doors. Every step I took on my way through the massive structure was taken past a nonstop array of concealed deadfalls, arrow-slits and spear ports. Murder holes lined the ceiling at frequent intervals, ready to drop rocks or burning lead upon any invader powerful—or suicidal—enough to actually breach the outer wall.

The directions on my orders have brought me to one of the fortress-like watchtowers arrayed along the great wall. It soars above me, taller than the walls of Castle Dupree, where I last stood and looked down on the Mor. A surcoated herald, a boy no more than twelve, scurries forward and, without a word, takes my papers.

I open my mouth to call after him, but he is gone before I can finish drawing breath, scurrying between two lines of marching soldiers. "Wait there!" he calls over his shoulder. He disappears into the tower.

I shrug and move toward a group of archers further down the wall. They sit in a loose circle, chatting amicably as they tend to their weapons and arrows. Many carry the short, deeply-curved bows common to the south. Only a few seem to favor the long, straight hunting bow I am accustomed to.

As I approach, one of the men elbows the sergeant, a deeply tanned man wearing a tunic of saffron yellow beneath a leather breastplate. An archer's helmet, a conical cap of leather stiffened with horn, sits atop his black, curling hair. He turns and fixes me with a wary eye. His gaze runs along the length of my bow and his frown deepens.

He turns away, muttering something to the man beside him, and both explode in raucous laughter. I feel my face grow hot.

"I cry your pardon," I say, polite but cold. "Something amuses you?"

The sergeant chortles again, and says, without turning, "Begone, wench. This spot's reserved for the Emperor's Archers. I think the place you're looking for is inside the wall, on Redfallow Lane. You should be able to find someone to buy what you're selling, despite those freakish eyes of yours."

Now all the men join in the laughter. I grit my teeth as the jibe strikes home; I have seen Redfallow Lane. Just this morning I passed by it on the way to the Armitage. The crimson lanterns marking every door; the pall of cheap, cloying perfume and rotting garbage. Slatternly women and not a few men calling out any number of crude invitations. It made quite an impression. In my mind, I feel more than hear my sister

bristle.

It is this way with veterans when faced with new recruits; Jazen spoke of it often. My black eyes only serve to make things worse. And I am no longer a scout, with the outside status the position holds. If I am to be one of them, I must prove my worth.

"Archers?" I scoff, allowing my lip to curl into an expression of amused disdain. I look the group over slowly, forcing myself to meet every stare. Most, seeing my green-within-black eyes fixed upon theirs, look swiftly away. "All I see here are children playing with toys." I toe one of the strange bows, back-bent now with its string removed, and wrinkle my nose, as if I smell something bad.

The sergeant turns, slowly, his smile fading. I offer my bow in my outstretched hand. Unstrung, it resembles a straight staff, nearly as long as I am tall, shaped from stout ash. The center swells gracefully, into a leather-wrapped grip. The ends are delicately curled outwards and tipped with notched horn. "Now this. *This* is a proper bow."

He looks at the weapon, then back at me, sizing me up. He shakes his head, making his long curls bounce upon his shoulders.

"I'll wager you can't even string that monster," he finally says. The men chuckle once again, some echoing his words in cruder terms.

Without fanfare I whip the string from my tunic. I slip the lower loop into its notch, then ground the butt of the weapon behind my heel. Using my entire leg as a lever, I give the bow a hard pull and the top end of the string pops into place.

I hold the strung weapon towards him. "And I'll wager you can't draw this to your ear. Your arms are very skinny. Are you sure that you're really not a pikeman who put on the wrong uniform by mistake?"

The men howl laughter, clapping one another on the back. The sergeant's already swarthy face grows darker still.

Careful now, my sister warns. You might well have to fight alongside these men one day. Best to not make enemies of them.

He rises and strides to me, snatching the weapon from my hand. He tests the string with callused fingertips, then hooks them around the cord. With a stifled grunt he hauls the string back, until his crooked fingers rest beside his ear. His straightened arm trembles, the muscles at his shoulder and elbow shaking with strain. A second later he releases the pull and grins in triumph.

"Now you," he says, clearly thinking I will not be able to duplicate the feat. He tosses the bow to me.

I walk past him, towards a set of wooden targets which have been erected against the watchtower's wall. Only one thing will impress a true archer. I stop on the mark someone has chalked on the stones and draw an arrow from the quiver on my back. The target is small, no larger than a book, drawn with charcoal on the scarred planks.

I raise the bow with both arms, then lower it, using all the strength in my shoulders to draw the feathered vanes back to my ear. I hold it there for several seconds, then look over at the sergeant with a raised eyebrow. His mouth purses and his eyes narrow, but he says nothing. Behind me, the men murmur.

I sight along the shaft. The target is close, no more than thirty paces, and there is no wind to speak of—an easy mark. I loose, knowing the moment the arrow leaves the string that the shot is true. The arrow strikes the center of the target. The men give a ragged cheer.

"A lucky shot," the sergeant says, waving a dismissive hand. I open my mouth to protest, my hand already drifting back to draw a second arrow, when I hear my name called from the watchtower door.

"May I?" I ask the sergeant. "I have orders to report to a Captain Garrett."

"Go ahead," he grumbles.

"Thank you, sergeant—?" I leave the title hanging, a question.

"Cyr. Sergeant Cyr, of the 103rd archer platoon. Don't forget it."

"Yes, sir," I agree with a nod. I might as well try to repair the damage I have done. I have no doubt I will be accepted into the captain's command; the defenders have the advantage of position, but I know there's no such thing as too much strength where the Mor are concerned.

He dismisses me with a wave and I dash away, towards the voice, which even now is repeating my name. It is the youth who took my papers.

"He's waiting for you," he says, turning on his heel and walking through the stout door.

The watchtower is roomy and open, with many balconies, standing beneath arrow slits. A stone staircase winds around the outer walls up towards the roof. The lower level is filled with desks and worktables, where dozens of scribes and clerks toil over maps and papers. Couriers run to and fro.

The boy dashes up the steps, two at a time. I follow, my long legs easily keeping pace. We emerge into sunlight. The boy seems completely unaffected by the long climb but my breath burns in my chest. *Soft living and too much wine takes its toll*, my sister drawls.

The center of the roof is dominated by a complex signaling mirror, a disk of flawless silvered glass the size of a serving platter set into an ornate bronze frame. Next to it stands an unlit bonfire. The square log construction reeks of oil and lard. A cage filled with pigeons stands near the stairs. They flutter and coo, their iridescent heads sparkling like jewels in the wan sunlight.

The captain stands at the battlements, looking out over the Mor host below. The bulk of their force is massed several miles to the west, under the Lion's Mouth, but a sizable contingent—two hundred at least—mill below the watchtower. A shining brass telescope stands on a wooden tripod at his side.

He is tall, taller even than Stathis was, with broad shoulders and a deep chest. His iron-grey hair is worn long, in the Imperial style, gathered into a horse's tail and held with a silver ring. A heavy, plum-colored cloak hangs at his back. It is not the color worn by those born to the purple, but it is close enough to mark his noble status.

"Wait here," the boy says, then hurries to his side. He whispers to him, and the captain turns towards me. His surcoat, worn over silvered mail, is the same deep purple as his cloak. A hawk is embroidered upon it in silver thread. His eyes are pale gray beneath unruly brows, piercing and direct. He waves me over, then puts his eye to the telescope.

"So nice of you to join us this morning," Captain Garrett says, not bothering to look at me. His voice is soft and deep, his tone just shy of insulting.

"I will be brief," he continues, sweeping the glass across the enemy below, then turning it to view the larger force before the main gates. "Your patron's letter of introduction was very flattering. It said you want to fight, and that you had skill with the bow. So, I have decided to assign you to the 103rd, second squad, under Sergeant Cyr."

Of course it would be him, my sister groans.

"I met the sergeant just now," I say, ignoring her.

Garrett takes his eye from the glass. His face shows me that this is not a man accustomed to interruptions.

"Quite," he says after favoring me with a long, icy stare. "In any case, you will report to him henceforth and follow his orders as if they were my own. You were a scout before coming here, were you not?"

"Yes," I say, then add, "Yes, *sir*."

"Well, I am not sure how you conducted yourself out in the wilderness, but here discipline and courage are worth more than skill. Follow your sergeant's orders and all will be well. Do we understand one another?"

"Yes, sir," I say, ignoring my sister's wordless growl.

Garrett nods to the youth, and the boy unrolls my orders on the desk. The captain signs them with a flourish. "Present these to Sergeant Cyr. He will requisition whatever supplies you need. Welcome to the 103rd." He turns back to the telescope.

I gather up my papers and move towards the stairs. Just before I can begin my descent, the captain calls my name. I pause.

"One more thing, scout," Garrett says. I walk back. Damn these pompous minor nobles and their little games. As if a man like him needed more affirmation of his control over common men and women.

"You patron also mentioned you have some familiarity with the healing arts?" he asks.

I mutter a curse under my breath; I asked Lia to not mention that fact in her letter, then say "Yes, sir."

He looks at me once more, his steely eyes weighing me. "So why man the walls? Why not stay behind them, and tend to the wounded, where it is safe?"

I bite back the harsh words I want to speak. Even though he is my commanding officer, and a noble besides, I am a citizen of the Empire. My choices are my own. I do not need to explain to him why I will not—why I *cannot*—spend too much time amongst the dead. I decide to tell him the lesser truth.

"Because the Mor took away everything I hold dear." I think of Lia, sitting beside my bed in the house of healing. "Almost everything, in any case. Such scores are best settled at the point of an arrow. Sir."

He weighs my answer, frowning a bit as if he knows I am not telling him the whole truth, then drops his gaze. "Well spoken," he murmurs. "Perhaps you'll be useful after all. Dismissed."

* * * *

"It won't be long now," Sergeant Cyr says, walking behind us. Archers line the battlements. They fidget and shift, checking and rechecking their strings and shafts. I stand at the line's end, the better for Cyr to observe and judge my performance, or so he says.

Dusk thickens the sky, drawing a dark cloak across the bright blue above. The first star twinkles in the firmament, aloof and cold. Below, the Mor shift and surge, forming into ragged lines.

Many in the front ranks bear stones, small boulders, really, each three feet or more across. The stone carriers carefully fit them into iron chain harnesses. The chains jingle musically.

"What are they doing?" I ask the man beside me.

"Something new. Just started it a few days ago. They'll use those harnesses as giant slings."

"They can hurl a stone so far?" I say, surprised. "But surely their stones cannot do much damage to the wall?"

"It's not the stones, it's the magic," he says. He spits in the Mor's general direction. "Fucking magic. Hate it."

"What do they do?"

"Just keep an eye out, and be ready to duck," he replies, smoothing his string. "The stones they fling explode when they hit, thanks to whatever power their shamans put into them. They rarely reach this high, but there have been casualties."

I frown and turn my attention back down towards the Mor. Many of the sling-bearers have been joined by their smaller brethren. The newcomers wear many decorations, and have crude symbols daubed on their carapaces in pale, chalk-like mud. Shamans.

I tense as I begin to suspect their plan. Mor shamans are masters of rock lore. I have seen them enchant the Mor's stone knives and hammers with searing heat. Such a weapon claimed the life of Jazen Tor.

The shamans begin a chant, their high-pitched, fluting voices rising on the freshening breeze. Their four hands gesture above the stones. A smell reaches me, like iron heating over the blacksmith's forge. The stones steam and smoke, then begin to glow a deep, sullen red. The stones sing as they heat, as if giving voice to their agony.

Soon they are glowing, the dim red shifting to brighter orange. The slingers heft their chains, lifting the stones effortlessly. The front line steps forward, almost within arrow range, as the shamans step back to the second row. They continue their chant, empowering even more stones. All along the wall, I can see similar sparks kindling, as far as the eye can see. It is a breathtaking sight, at once majestic and unearthly, a river of stars brought to earth.

A few arrows whistle out into the growing darkness. "Hold your fire, you cowardly maggots!" Cyr bellows, striding down the line. He cuffs a young archer savagely, driving him to his knees. "Wait for my order; they'll have to come within range before they let fly!"

I wipe my hand on my thigh and ignore the urge to shoot down into the enemy below. The Mor move closer. They begin to swing their cradles back and forth, faster and faster, until the rocks trace glowing circles in the deepening gloom. Sparks fly.

"Archers ... draw!" Cyr shouts. All along the line I hear the call echoed by other sergeants. As one we pull our bows. The Mor stop their advance. The chain cradles hum malevolently.

"Loose!" the sergeant screams. Six score bows reply, filling the air with the flat thrum of death. Our arrows fly into the black, disappearing from sight. A moment later the hard steel rain falls upon our enemies' heads.

Many shafts miss their targets; firing at night is no easy task. Still, more than a few manage to strike their targets. Of those, most are turned aside by the Mor's stone-like skin, bouncing harmlessly away.

A few of the inhuman warriors hoot in agony as barbs find weak places, but none fall. One is struck in the visor and screams, letting go of its chain to clutch at its stricken face. The stone within streaks up and

away like a meteor, finally crashing back to earth behind the enemy lines.

"Another volley!" Cyr calls. "Then be ready to seek cover!" Again we let fly with our arrows, and again we are rewarded with scattered cries of pain and wildly careening stones. When they strike the earth, the stones shatter like bombs, spraying glowing shards in all directions.

The Mor let slip their deadly missiles. There are so many, three score at least, rising like a wall of fire. They arc, nearly as high as the summit, careening towards us.

"Cover! Cover!" Cyr screams, scurrying towards the battlements. Men drop, seeking shelter behind the waist-high stones.

The blazing rocks strike, louder than thunder. Beneath me, the wall shivers and groans like a living thing. Reverberations travel like an earthquake, heralding the rumble of other impacts.

I must see. I pop my head over the battlement and look west, towards the mighty gates. There are many Mor there, so many more than here. How can the gates survive such punishment?

A flurry of lightning and an expanding sheet of flame answers me: mages. The defenders have concentrated their might there, at the wall's weakest point, and lash the enemy with their eldritch fury, blunting the worst of the attack.

But here, we are not so lucky; all we have are archers and good arrows and the resolve to use them. I look down and see the second Mor line advancing, their blazing stones already in motion. The first line scurries back, dropping their cradles to the earth. Fresh missiles are swiftly loaded.

"Archers, draw!" Cyr shouts, popping back to his feet. The men stand, drawing hastily. Only two in three are ready when the order to fire is given. Sloppy.

I send my arrow into the night and draw a fresh shaft. It is in the air before the first has reached its target, and a third is on the string before most of the others have reloaded once.

The Mor's second volley is as devastating as the last. Once more the wall shivers. This time, a glowing stone crashes into the battlements not ten yards from where I crouch. It explodes, spraying fragments of burning hot rock, sharp as razors, in a lethal fan. Men scream and stagger back, slapping at their smoldering clothes. Blood steams in the cool air.

The act of reloading and firing becomes automatic, mechanical, interspersed with frantic scrabbling for cover. The wall tolls, a gargantuan bell struck by the hammer of a god. The ground at its base is littered with dead Mor, more than thirty, but still they fling their fiery stones. In the distance, the continuous clap of the mages' lightning fills the air with a never-ending rumble.

From further down the wall, men hurry towards us. They wear complex leather harnesses studded with metal clips, from which a bewildering array of tools swing and sway. Engineers. At their head is a broad man, blunt-faced and bald. His hands are enormous, dangling at the end of thickly muscled arms like shovel blades. His earth-colored robes are stitched with elaborate arcane symbols.

The engineers look over the edge, down at the wall, surveying the damage. They turn and speak into the mage's ear. He nods, then presses his palms against the top of the wall. He chants in a strange language, a deep, rumbling sound reminiscent of grinding of boulders. How a mortal throat can make such a sound is beyond me; it must be the language of the earth elementals.

"What's happening?" I ask the man beside me.

"He's asking the wall to be strong. Shoring it up. I've never seen them here while an attack is happening, though. They usually only come after, to help with the repairs. Oh, this is bad ... very bad."

"Courage, men! Courage!" a new voice rings out. I look aside and see Captain Garrett, walking along the line. He does not duck when the Mor stones crash into the wall. Perhaps he thinks that some divine grace will spare him. He kneels beside a fallen archer. Cyr frowns and shakes his head, and the captain draws the archer's blood-soaked cloak across his face.

The Mor send a fresh wave of burning death into the air. Some premonition reaches me, a sense of imminent danger. I see a glowing stone flying straight for me, as unerring as a hound to a hare. It seems to grow as it approaches, drawing long shadows from the sheltering crenellations.

"Down! Down!" I scream, pushing the man beside me to the deck. Out of the corner of my eye I see Garrett, the fool, standing to see what is the matter.

I leap for him, but I am too slow. The stone strikes the space between two of the wide blocks, exploding into a shower of fragments. A fragment ricochets off the back of my borrowed helm, and my vision explodes into sparks.

Sight returns slowly, bringing with it the stench of burning hair. I struggle to my belly and prop myself on my elbows. Bodies lie all around, some burning fitfully. The earth mage lies still, surrounded by his engineers. A spreading pool of bloods slicks the stones beneath him.

Cyr blinks over at me; he too has been knocked from his feet. His cap is missing. He does not appear injured. I look over at Garrett, in time to see him slump against the battlements.

Blood sheets down his surcoat and his mailed arms in a crimson stream. His beard is no longer gray; it is red, so very red. As I watch, a jet of blood fountains into the air. He gurgles, clutching at his mangled throat.

"Gods, no!" Cyr screams. "The captain's been hurt! Someone fetch the priest! The priest!"

I scramble forward, hissing as my knee comes down on my bow. I lift the fallen commander, cradling him in my lap. A flap of skin hangs down from the side of his neck. Blood jets from severed arteries. No help can reach him in time; he is only moments from death.

My secret eye slides open, and there before me is the shining map of his life. I see his heart flutter as blood loss takes its toll. In a moment it will stop.

Before I can think to stop them, the tendrils of my blood magic to rush up from my belly. I shiver in obscene delight as they penetrate the captain's body. My smile transforms into a grimace of effort as I coax them towards the hideous wound. Others coil up, into the labyrinthine mass inside his skull.

As they travel they draw blood up, past the ruined artery. The crimson stream slackens, then stops.

"What are you..." Cyr says, his voice thick. "The blood ... your skin ... Oh, gods!" A moment later he turns aside. He vomits across the bloody stones. I cannot be distracted, lest the ravening tendrils slip my grasp, so I ignore him.

As soon as I am content that blood is flowing past the terrible injury, carrying its cargo of precious life into the wounded captain's brain, I turn my attention to his slashed neck. I concentrate, willing the tendrils to mass at the site of the wound. The outer edges are crisped, burnt black by the burning fragments.

I must do what I can to close the wound, without hindering the life-giving flow streaming up through his

neck. Even a brief interruption might leave him a drooling, mindless thing, worse than dead. It might already be too late.

My secret sight shows me the torn vessels. One by one, I coax them closed. The blood magic responds to my will, grudgingly and with many protestations, but soon the torn flesh begins to mend. I reach out and smooth the ragged flap over the knitting arteries, holding it in place until, guided by the blood magic, it can take root.

I take away my hand, and watch as the blood on my palm sinks slowly into my flesh, like water into parched clay. My leathers are soaked with the captain's life blood, but I know that not a single drop remains on my skin. Behind me, one of the men breathes a prayer to Shanira.

As if the goddess's name has summoned her, I hear a priest call out, "I am here! Who has need of the Lady's mercy?" Men call out and point. I hear the scuff of sandaled feet.

I command the red tendrils to return to my body, shivering once more as they slide from his flesh. It seems easier this time, albeit slightly. As soon as the last is free, the captain gives one last heaving shudder, then falls still.

The priest kneels, pushing me rudely aside. He presses two fingers to the captain's neck, carefully avoiding the livid burn that is all which remains of the wound. He nods.

"His heart beats strongly. What happened here?" He looks at the blood, sprayed all around, takes in my soaked leathers. His eyes meet mine, and go wide. Beside him, Cyr stares at me, his eyes full of fear. I feel a tear slide down from the corner of my black eyes and absently wipe it away. It is a tear of blood. I turn aside before he can see my flesh draw it in.

I do not explain; he will not understand. All that matters now is that the captain will live to fight another day.

Men cry out once more as a fresh volley of burning stone crashes against the wall in a wave of fire and rock. I force my secret eye shut, studiously ignoring the specters of the dead soldiers clustered on the battlements. Wordlessly, I retrieve my bow and set a fresh arrow to the string.

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CHAPTER SEVEN

"Kirin, did you hear what I said?" Lia asks. I jerk back to myself. No. I did not.

"I'm sorry. I must have been woolgathering," I say. Lia sighs theatrically, but she does not look mad. Yet.

We walk the streets, surrounded by the City's thronging inhabitants. It is warm today, perhaps the last truly warm day we shall have for months, and it seems as if most of the city has taken to the streets. Ever since leaving our rented rooms, Lia has filled the air with bright chatter, pointing out this new fashion or that, identifying members from half a dozen different races.

While she spoke, my mind began to wander, until it was far away, back on the wall, on the night of my first watch. After they took Captain Garrett away, the Mor continued their assault, sending volley after volley of fiery death into the sky. Only in the small hours before dawn, when their shamans were exhausted, did they withdraw into the darkness.

They took their fallen dead with them, leaving only cooling boulders splashed with their foul, black blood. On an impulse, I volunteered to go over the wall, to scout the area below.

While engineers worked above me, assessing the extent of the damage, and others hurried to recover still-intact arrows from the bloodstained ground, I walked amongst the discarded boulders, still steaming gently in the morning air. I found a Mor knife, lying half under one of the stones. Without thinking, I picked it up, hissing in pain as the handle scalded me through my gloves.

When it had cooled, I tested the edge with my thumb. It was sharp, like a razor, chipped from flinty gray stone and carved with symbols. The handle was wrapped with the same pale hide as they wear about their hips. When the recall sounded, I tucked the thing into my belt and allowed them to pull me back up.

For three days I stood, and fought, beside the men of the 103rd. We slept like the dead by day, on crowded, narrow bunks deep beneath the watchtower. The nights were a burning hell, filled with flying boulders and the screams of men. Often, I would feel eyes upon me, only to find Sergeant Cyr watching me. His face was closed, hostile. I did my best to ignore him. When our relief finally came four days later, I felt as if I had stood atop the Armitage for weeks.

"I said that Archibald Garrett will make a full recovery," Lia says, pulling me out of my reverie. She frowns when I stare at her, then adds, "Captain Garrett, your commanding officer? Does that not make you happy?"

"Of course," I reply.

Lia looks at me out of the corner of her eye as we continue to walk. "You know," she finally says, "I have heard rumors about that day. Some say you were there with him when he was injured. That you touched his wound, and kept him from bleeding to death."

"It was madness," I say with a shrug. "Explosions; chaos. Darkness and fire. I did what anyone would do and staunched the bleeding until the priests could arrive."

Lia looks at me again, openly. We have been together for long enough that I can tell she senses there is more to the story, but I cannot bring myself to tell her the rest. Guilt twists in my breast like a knife blade.

Why don't you just tell her? my sister asks. After all, she was there with us when your power killed ... the child. Your son. My nephew. What can be worse than that? At least this time, like in the mountains, you used the power to heal, not harm. She will understand.

It is true. Even after witnessing the greatest of my many crimes she still cares for me; even after feeling the blood magic in her own body she still will touch, and be touched by, me. And yet, I still find myself remaining silent, as if my refusal to speak will somehow conceal what we both know happened atop the wall.

Lia drops her gaze, sighing softly, a sound my sister echoes in my mind. How can I explain to her the primal revulsion I feel now, whenever the blood magic stirs? How can I express the depths of my fear?

"All I mean to say," she continues, "is that whoever saved him did a good thing. Not only because it was the right thing to do, but also because Captain Garrett belongs to one of the old families. Not exactly royalty, but high enough in the Imperial court that having them owe a favor is certainly a good thing."

"You think I care about that?" I ask, my shame transforming into a sick anger.

"No, of course not; I know better," she replies. "I am just saying your actions have consequences. In this case, good ones. Why you continue to hide your true talent is—"

"Is my concern," I finish, aware that my tone is sharp but unable to help it. "All I want to do right now is fight. Surely you can understand that?"

She stops and looks at me. Sympathy shines from her wide eyes, an expression I often find trying but for now I welcome. It will stop the course of this discussion before it can become an argument. Or so I hope.

"I understand," she says. "And I will speak no more of it. For now. Besides, we are here."

She points to one of the row houses. It looks vacant, its windows shuttered tight. A man in an elegant brocade doublet and the short cloak of a solicitor waits for us on the stairs. I shake my head, trying to dispel the fog which seems to have settled over me, and follow her up to meet him.

* * * *

"Do you like it?" Lia asks. "It is a bit small, but there should be room enough for us both."

I look around the townhouse, trying not to gape. It is lovely, there is no other word for it, all smooth plaster walls and polished wood. Candelabra of polished brass hang from the high ceilings and thick, rippled glass sparkles in the diamond-paned windows. It is larger than my marriage cottage. Much larger.

Both our cottages together weren't this grand, my sister says, clearly impressed. Her approval calms me. I was worried about what she would think. Kirin was always the one with the head for more practical matters; always the one who knew which silver pattern was in style or how to artfully and tastefully decorate a room.

She was a good student in that, if nothing else, and our mother was the consummate teacher. Mother always tried so hard to prepare us for marriage, and for our triumphant return to the courtly society that had exiled her father and the rest of his family, including his very ambitious daughter, so many years before. Of course, things worked out so very differently than Mother had hoped in the end, hadn't they?

"It ... I don't know what to say. Only in dreams could I have imagined such a home," I say. Lia beams.

"Come upstairs. There is more to see," she says, climbing the wide staircase. The wood creaks softly beneath her feet.

A trio of large bedrooms fills the second floor, each with a splendid view. The front room overlooks the tree-lined street; others the small garden and the whitewashed wall at the rear of the property. One of the

back rooms, perhaps used as some lady's sitting parlor, has wide bay windows, through which I can see the shadowed bulk of the Armitage in the distance.

"Can this be my room?" I ask.

Lia smiles, but just for a moment some vague hurt flits across her face, as if I have said something wrong.

"But of course, if that is your wish," she says, and the expression vanishes. "I will take the front room, if you do not mind. The noise from the street does not bother me. We can use the third for your weapons and armor. And for those books in my collection that should be kept under lock and key. So, the house is acceptable, then?"

"It's more than acceptable; it's wonderful. But there's no need for such extravagance, Lia, truly. My posting will have me sleeping in the barracks every other week, more if they have need of me, so I'll only be with you half the time. The wage I receive will more than pay for a room in some inn closer to the wall."

Have you taken leave of your senses? my sister exclaims. Sleep in some flea-infested boarding house when we can live here? This is the Garden District! Do you know how coveted an address here is?

I resist the urge to answer, limiting myself to a sigh. "Besides," I continue, "your family must be thrilled to finally have you back. Surely they want you to return there?"

"No," she says, shaking her head. "I mean, yes, they are happy, and my father would have me back if he could, but I cannot. After everything that has happened, I just ... cannot imagine going back there. Back to having servants waiting on my every desire. Back to sleeping in my old room, with the frilly lace curtains and the shelves lined with dolls. *Dolls*, can you imagine? I ... just cannot go back to that."

I remember Lia on the walls of Castle Dupree, defending the refugees against the Mor. Remember her calling out to the sky, drawing the lightning down upon our enemies while her unbound hair streamed and snapped like a war banner. She was a goddess then, an avatar of nature. I try to imagine such a woman sleeping in a little girl's bed, surrounded by delicate, china-faced toys. I cannot.

I rest my hand upon hers and nod. "I understand," I say. "And I thank you for inviting me to stay. I will repay this kindness, I swear it."

I'm sure you will, my sister comments. She does have quite an impressive appetite, doesn't she? Tell me. How does it feel to be a kept woman? Is it everything you hoped it would be?

I freeze as the barb in my sister's words digs deep. Her vehemence is unexpected; just moments ago she seemed so happy with the house and the possibility of living here.

"Do not be foolish," she admonishes. "There is nothing to repay. I want you here with me."

Lia presses her hand down on mine, lingering for a moment, then starts downstairs, where the solicitor waits with his papers and contracts. I pause on the landing.

"I am nobody's doxy," I hiss as soon as she is gone. My sister's silence is as eloquent as any shrug. I wait a moment longer, then when she does not answer I follow.

Downstairs, Lia and the solicitor sit at the long table in the dining room, across from one another, discussing the details of the transaction. I hear a sum mentioned, and try not to stare. I knew Lia's family was wealthy, but apparently I had no idea just what that word meant. It is more than my father, a

landowner, could have saved in an entire lifetime.

After a time I grow bored of their talk. I rise and walk towards the open front door. *You could do worse than to learn about how such transactions are arranged*, my sister scolds. *One can never have too much knowledge of finance, or of the law.*

"Don't speak to me right now," I whisper back. "Besides, you just want to stare at the solicitor."

Nothing wrong with that. He's not unpleasant to look at, in a foppish sort of way. And he's no doubt wealthy, what with his clientele. Perhaps if you went back and at least tried to look interested...

"Stop. You know such things are not for me."

The business, or the solicitor?

I do not reply, but this time she does not press the issue. I let out my held breath and walk out onto the stone stoop, looking over the quiet street. Leaves flutter down from the oaks, carpeting the paving stones. They are red in the bright sunshine, as vivid as fresh-spilt blood.

I stare, fighting a feeling of unease. Nothing can hurt me here, I remind myself. The enemy is outside, barred from entry by the strength of the Armitage and the courage of the defenders who stand upon it. I am safe here.

Lia and the solicitor, I realize I do not remember the man's name, eventually emerge. He locks the house and promises the keys will be delivered just as soon as the final papers can be drawn up and signed.

They part with many an earnest handshake. We stroll off, and Lia invites me to take afternoon coffee. We walk towards the main thoroughfare.

At mid-day it is busy with wagons and carts, loud with the sound of hooves and the clatter of iron-shod wheels. Voices cry out in a dozen different tongues. Lia strolls down the crowded street, as happy as I have ever seen her. Her face is radiant, and there is a bounce in her step that snags at my heart. Soon we find an empty table at a corner cafe and settle in.

"My grandfather inherited his fortune, but then made another on his own by supplying the army with material and supplies," she tells me when I ask about her grasp of the complexities of finance. "Father was often away, teaching at the colleges or advising the emperor, and Mother always had so many court functions to attend, so I was raised at Grand Sir's knee. I could figure a column of numbers before I could read. Sometimes I wonder if he would be pleased with my choice to follow in Father's footsteps."

"Your grandfather is dead?" I ask, putting my hand on hers.

"Three years before I entered the College of Air, when I was twelve," she says, eyes downcast. "He always claimed he was proud of my father and his accomplishments in the elemental arts, but sometimes I think he would have been happier if he had followed him into the family business."

We sip the strong bitter coffee from delicate china cups. A river of people passes slowly by our table, a vivid display of multicolored linen, silk and satin, fashions from every far-flung corner of the Empire.

"Where is she from?" I ask, pointing to a stunning woman across the street. This is Lia's favorite game, and we have played it often since my release from the house of healing. I'm happy to oblige her; unlike the tedium of finance and the law, this is something I might find use for one day, and perhaps this will distract her from the melancholy which has settled over her.

The woman I indicate is tall, taller than many of the men, with wide shoulders and an otter-lithe waist. Her sepia skin, displayed in near-scandalous quantity, shines in the sun with mahogany highlights. A cloak of iridescent feathers trails behind her.

Three men, shoulders and arms rippling with muscle, follow close behind. They wear broad, curved swords at their hips and scowl at passers-by.

"She hails from Turan, far to the south," Lia replies. "The cloak marks her as a member of the Usiif clan. Good traders; even better warriors. Do you see those scars on her face?" I nod. The woman's cheeks are scrimshawed with intricate patterns of tiny, raised bumps, spiraling under and around her almond-shaped eyes.

"They denote royalty, and are considered to be quite fetching, even erotic, in Turanian culture." She leans forward and whispers, "If you were to see her unclothed, you would see more of them in most uncomfortable places, or so they say. The men as well." She laughs at my pained expression.

"If I had to guess, I would say she's an unmarried second or third daughter of one of their barons, what they call an *U'shu*," she continues in a normal tone of voice. "Those men are her honor guard, charged with defending her virtue from all threats."

I can see why. I've seen prostitutes wearing more clothes. It's shameful.

"My sister finds her dress embarrassingly revealing," I say. I do not mention the true nature of her disapproval; I know it is the woman's warrior heritage that is the true source of her disdain, not some arbitrary display of flesh.

"She should never visit the deep south then," Lia replies with a wicked smile. "There the sun burns so hot that often the women wear nothing at all, save a brief strip of linen about their hips."

The striking woman is swallowed by the throng, and disappears from view. More than one of the passers-by, not all of them men, turn to watch her swaying backside as she passes. I feel my lips curling in response to her good humor.

"Remind me to tell you the tale of Laphat the Necromancer one evening, when you're in the mood for a good ghost story," I say. "He was a southerner as well. It was one of the stories we used to tell each other when we were children, on Harvestpast night."

"I used to love Harvestpast stories as a girl," she replies, leaning forward and squeezing my hand. "Staying up with my friends and scaring each other half to death with ghost stories. Tell me."

I look up at the clear blue sky, and shake my head. "It's not a story for sunshine and a corner table at a cafe, dear heart."

"Oh, please. Just a little. Perhaps I have heard it."

"All right," I laugh. "Just a bit. Laphat, it was said, was a powerful Speaker to the Dead, the inventor of an evil talisman called a *vod'hule*. In the story, he used the talisman to summon an army of the dead, all because of a beautiful woman's scorn. She was married to a southern king, you see, and though she was beautiful, and was lusted after by Laphat, she was also black-hearted and spiteful. He tried to overthrow the kingdom with his army, all so that he could prove himself to a woman who hated him."

Lia ponders for a moment, her brows drawn down, then smiles and shakes her head. "No. I have not heard that one. You must tell me of him one night. When we are both in the mood to stay up and tell stories to one another."

"I promise."

I sip my drink, and watch the crowd flow past, allowing the bitter liquid to roll across my tongue. I had to add a dollop of honey to the cup to make the taste bearable, but Lia seems perfectly content to drink hers as it was brewed.

I look at Lia, and find her frowning into her cup. She grows uncharacteristically quiet.

"Nervous?" I ask her.

"No." She sighs. "Yes. It has been so long since I last saw my father. I fear what the college must have told him about my leave-taking."

"You only left because you wanted to be back here, at his side," I remind her. "Surely he cannot find fault with that?"

"Oh, you might be surprised. I called upon my family on two different occasions since we returned, but each time he was not at home. His duties coordinating the city's mystic defenses keep him very busy. But Mother was gracious enough to plan our welcome home party nonetheless."

"Well, thank you for inviting me," I say. "I'm looking forward to meeting the legendary Argus Cho."

Lia smiles at this, but I sense her heart is not in the gesture. I shrug and let the mystery pass; she will tell me her troubles when she is ready. She always does, eventually.

She perks up a moment later, sitting up straight with wide eyes. "That reminds me. I made an appointment with a seamstress for later this afternoon. I am quite sure that one of the gowns Mother sent over will fit you with a bit of work. I was thinking of the dark red one with the low back. It never looked good on me and it will look worse now that I am as brown as bark, but against your pale skin..." She lets the sentence trail off, looking me up and down with a shrewd eye. I feel myself blushing at the unexpected scrutiny.

"Just so long as I don't have to wear those torture implements you call shoes," I mutter, draining the last of my coffee. Lia laughs.

"No promises. Come, we must not keep her waiting. I have some most wonderful fabric I was thinking of making into a kirtle..."

I look at myself in the borrowed glass, turning this way and that. The room behind me is cluttered with trunks and wardrobes, most overflowing with clothes. Gowns and dresses of shining, jewel-like brilliance. Chests filled with shoes and gloves. All so delicate and feminine, cunningly embroidered and set with seed pearls or beads or even tiny gemstones. In the other room, I hear Lia chatting with the seamstress, describing the drape of the garment she wants her to make.

The gown I wear, freshly tailored to fit my spare frame, is intricate and constricting, with long flowing skirts and a tight bodice; quite in style, or so Lia assures me. It is dark as old wine, catching the candlelight and throwing it back in ruby sparks. A spill of garnets adorns the bodice.

My breasts spill from the top of the plunging neckline, two alabaster globes pressed upwards by the corset's cruel grip. They have not yet returned to the size they were prior to my pregnancy. For once, I am glad of the fact.

"How do courtly women do this every day?" I whisper to my sister. "First it was the seamstress, then a bath followed by the hairdresser. They must do nothing all day except preen and strut and fret about

what gown they will wear next."

And gossip, don't forget, she laughs in my head. But you're right; for some that is true. Life at court is mostly about giving the right impression. For women especially that means looking properly ornamental. Just be glad you're not overly large; remember Mother's story about the dowager who insisted she could fit into her twenty-year-old maiden's dress when it came back into style?

I smile. "She died, her belly crushed when she commanded four of her maids to all grab the laces of her corset and pull, as hard as they could. As I recall, she always told that story whenever you or I asked for more dessert."

I resist the urge to adjust my hair. The hairdresser did a wonderful job piling my pale blond locks atop my head, and I do not want to jeopardize the tenuous arrangement. The gown accents the smooth curve of my muscled shoulders and exposes my slender throat.

Lia sweeps in, her skirts gathered in her hands. Her dress is of cream satin trimmed with midnight blue, with tapered sleeves and a high, belted waist. Her hair is in ringlets tonight, the chestnut spill cascading down her freckled back. A jeweled comb, shaped like a butterfly, sparkles amongst the gleaming tresses.

I recall giving her the gift, earlier in the evening. I wore it for Jazen, more than once, on the blissful nights we shared before the coming of the Mor, but never since. Now, seeing it in her hair fills me with a sense of rightness, and anticipation.

"Well, never mind then," she calls over her shoulder to the seamstress. "Perhaps another time. For now, perhaps you can just—" She sees me and stops. A smile lights her face.

"Stay right here; I have something for you," she says, then turns around and walks out. I hear her thanking the seamstress, then the gentle clink of coins. I pivot, trying to look at myself in the mirror and get used to the unaccustomed ripple and flow of the skirts. Good. The boots I slipped on when Lia was not looking do not show beneath their drape. How she expects me to walk in the ridiculous shoes she left for me is completely unfathomable.

Lia returns, bearing a small wooden box. Something inside buzzes angrily. A necklace sits atop it, a silver pendant strung on a black ribbon. She sets the box on the table and moves behind me, the necklace in her hands.

"This will be perfect," she says with relish, lowering it over my head. The metal is chill against my collar bones, but swiftly warms. I feel her fingers working at the nape of my neck as she secures the clasp, and shiver. "There."

The pendant is a silver coin, two inches across, engraved with the profile of an elegant woman. Her hair, unbound, streams away from her face. A crescent moon hangs behind her. Letters run around its perimeter, written in a flowing script that I cannot read. The black ribbon is snug against my throat, accenting its length and emphasizing its slenderness.

"It's lovely," I say, turning it so that it catches the candlelight. "What is it?"

"It is from Turan. Seeing the woman outside the cafe reminded me of it. It depicts one of their goddesses, Shamaat. She is a hunter and a warrior. I thought you might accept it as a gift." She rests her hands on my shoulders, leaning forward and looking at me in the glass.

"Yes. With thanks. It's very lovely."

"As are you," she whispers. She smiles and steps back, then picks up the box. "Lower your gown," she

says.

I raise an eyebrow. "Go on," she laughs. "This cost a very pretty penny, but if one is to make the proper impression in polite society, there really is no avoiding it."

She reaches into the box and draws out a large insect. Its body, six inches long and plump as a tuber, writhes sluggishly, as if drugged. It beats the air with its long, striped wings, filling the room with the buzzing I heard before. Its legs wave feebly in the air. As I watch, it flashes with pale greenblue light.

Lia presses the insect to the table and picks up a knife; then, with a casual stroke, severs its abdomen. She tosses the still moving remains into a basket on the floor. Lia rolls the severed organ, as large as an apple, between her palms, pressing gently, until it glows with a strange, steady light.

She walks behind me once more and helps me take down my dress. The fall air is brisk, even inside, and I feel my nipples stiffening, almost painfully, in the chill air. Lia regards me in the glass, her eyes trailing across my body.

Lia squeezes the organ and a dollop of softly glowing liquid pools at its severed end. She lowers it to my skin and traces around my shoulder, spiraling inwards. The cool liquid warms quickly against my skin, and the light intensifies. A smell fills the air, a blend of burnt cinnamon and some delicate animal musk.

"Your body heat will keep the naraja's glow strong for several hours," she says, repeating the design on my other shoulder. "I was lucky to find such a healthy pair so late in the season."

"Pair?" I ask. Lia trails the damp end across my back, spiraling around my shoulder blades then along my spine, and I shiver once more.

"This is the male's essence. It glows with this strong blue light. He uses it to find his mate, signaling in the dark until a female sees, and replies. The female naraja glows pale orange, like liquid fire."

"And you will wear the female's light tonight?" I ask.

"Yes," she replies, moving to stand in front of me.

Lia dabs at my belly, tracing intricate, branching curls. She motions for me to pull down the front of my skirt and I oblige, giving her room to continue the design around my hip bones and across the gentle swell below my navel. Then she moves up, extending the design along my ribs. She leans close, her eyes fixed on her work, and I feel the warmth of her breath against my skin. The glowing oil covers the fresh scrapes and bruises I have acquired on the wall, and Lia is careful to craft her design to include them all.

Standing this close, I can smell her perfume, a delicate mix of crushed flowers mixed with the clean tang of oranges. The fragrance is unique to her, blended in a shop a few blocks south of the Imperial Palace. I breathe in deeply, inhaling through my nose, and allow my eyes to slide closed.

When she traces the liquid light around my breasts, I must force myself to remain still, biting my lower lip gently. Lia ends her design with a final spiral, terminating at my left nipple. She looks up at me with a mischievous grin, her face inches from my skin, then breathes across the still-damp fluid. The design flares with brilliance in response to her breath, as does my flesh. Delicious expectation kindles a spark deep inside me. My legs tremble.

"Now me," Lia says, withdrawing the other insect from the box. Again the knife flashes. She rolls the light-giving organ and hands it to me. It is warm, throbbing slightly in my hand.

We exchange places, Lia sitting before the mirror. "How do I make the pattern?" I ask, unsure where to

begin.

"There is no right way or wrong; just do whatever seems pleasing," she says, watching me in the glass. Her eyes shine like slivers of summertime sky in the candlelight and a blush rides high in her cheeks.

Against her sun-browned skin, the orange naraja light shines with mellow fire. I trace a branching circle across her back, then extend the lines around, wrapping them like arms about her. Her belly still bears traces of softness that even our time on the road has not erased, so much more feminine than my own muscled torso. Her breasts are full and heavy, even though she has never suckled a child, tipped with large, dark aureoles. I brush one with the glowing liquid and watch it pucker. Lia draws in a quick, shuddering breath.

"Breathe across it," she whispers. I do, watching the pale light flare in response. The color in her cheeks deepens. Her skin smells of perfume and the subtle musk of the naraja, a potent mix.

"I begin to see why the ladies are so mad for this," I whisper, and Lia laughs.

"Come, we will be late if we do not hurry, and my father is not a man who is accustomed to waiting," she says in an unsteady voice. I look into her summer-blue eyes a moment longer, reading the desire there, drawing it into myself.

She pulls up her dress and bids me stand before her, then completes the design on my cheeks and across the bridge of my nose. I cannot duplicate her skill; my own efforts look more like war paint, but on her the contrast between her elfin features and the bold, orange strokes looks lovely.

She leans towards me and gives me a kiss, soft as a feather, yet lingering. I breathe in her breath, reveling as the moment stretches, suspended between bliss and anticipation of what might happen next. I trail my fingernails along her arm, smiling when she shivers in response.

"We really must go," she says, breaking away.

Outside, the rented carriage awaits. The driver offers us his hand as we climb the steps. Lia accepts the assistance but I mount easily. The driver sees my boots as I clamber up, and gives me a puzzled grin.

He shuts the door and a moment later we clatter into the night.

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CHAPTER EIGHT

Lia's family manor, as befitting a man of Argus Cho's lofty status, sits only a few blocks from the royal compound. The high wall surrounding the property is set with ornate iron lamps, which spill their brilliance in pools of yellow light onto the street below.

The main gates, black iron cast into the shape of twin trees with interlocking branches, are open, guarded by a pair of elemental mages. A line of carriages has already formed along the thoroughfare leading to the house. They glitter in the chill night air, polished contrivances of ebony wood and brass.

"Can't we just get out here and walk?" I ask.

Lia fixes me with a scandalized stare, as if I have suggested we hike up our skirts and make water in the street. I shrug and let the matter drop.

The line moves forward, slowly. We pass through the gate and up the curved drive leading to the house, the horse's hooves ringing on the damp cobblestones. The entrance is sheltered beneath a broad overhang. The smell of manure, women's perfume and the city's own unique odor, flint and old smoke and the exhaled breath of a million people, blend into a complex tapestry.

A liveried servant opens the carriage door. He places an embroidered stool on the ground beneath the steps and offers Lia his hand.

A moment later I follow her, accepting the footman's assistance, even though I do not need it. As I descend I hold my skirts, trying to conceal my chunky boots. They ring on the cobblestones and I wince at the noise, wishing I'd simply accepted the torture of Lia's cruel shoes. As soon as I am down, Lia takes my arm and leads me inside, through the wide-open doors.

Inside, the entrance hall is a contrast in pale marble and dark mahogany. Lamps of rare and expensive gaslight shine on the walls and in the ornate chandelier overhead, bathing the room in steady, mellow light. Paintings of stern-faced men and serene women, Lia's ancestors I presume, glower down while elegantly gowned and coifed men and women mill and mingle beneath them. All greet Lia with warm handshakes or polite hugs, welcoming her back. Introductions are made in a dizzying flurry. I know I will never remember them all.

Don't worry. One of us paid attention to mother's lessons, remember. Most of the family names are familiar to me. These people represent the cream of Imperial society; it would not do to forget them.

"Thank you," I whisper behind my hand, pathetically grateful for my sister's help. I would rather face a line of charging Mor than run this gauntlet of smiling, elegantly dressed revelers, but I am here now and there is nothing to be done about it. This is important to Lia, so I will do my best to smile and mouth empty nothings.

As I move through the room, I hear whispers, brief snatches of conversation. "I hear she shares rooms with Argus Cho's daughter," someone whispers behind me. "Nobody knows where she comes from; some nowhere village up north is the rumor," says another.

Every time I turn, all I see is a mass of bland, emptily smiling faces. The women all try not to flinch when I make eye contact, but none can manage the trick. They smile: brittle, frosty things devoid of all warmth. The men's attention is more direct, if equally unwelcome, their eyes lingering on the swell of my breasts, seldom rising to meet my eyes.

At least with men it is easy to know the course of their desires, my sister says with a laugh.

Lia walks towards the doors at the back of the entrance hall and I follow. I hear music from the room beyond. The lamps there have been turned down low and people dance in the subdued light, forming intricate, swirling patterns. They have skin of every color imaginable, from the deepest ebony to my own pale.

Many of the women and not a few of the men glow with the soft luminescence of the naraja, in patterns that put my own crude efforts for Lia to shame. The insects' strange perfume fills the air mixing with the gentle musk of dancing bodies. The pleasant ache in my thighs grows more insistent.

Lia's ornamentation seems almost barbaric next to theirs, but if she notices, or cares, she shows no sign. It is only after we are halfway across the room that I realize that while some of the men present glow with the cool blue light of the male naraja, none of the women wear that color.

I catch Lia's eye and she smiles back at me, spots of color riding high in her cheeks. The cloisonne butterfly winks at me from amongst her curls. I cannot help but wonder what message her choice of decoration is sending, then I recognize it does not matter. I could not care less what these people think of me.

We move deeper into the room, Lia's hand clasped in mine. She has a word and a greeting for everyone we pass. Her easygoing banter and relaxed pose is belied by the intensity of her grip.

She is afraid of something.

A small group stands in a pool of candlelight against the ballroom's far wall, before a wall of darkened windows. Lia steers me towards them, and I see men and woman, dressed not in gowns but in embroidered robes.

At their center stands a tall man, his hairless head gleaming as if oiled. In place of robes, he wears a greatcoat of charcoal velvet, trimmed with buttons of ruddy gold. His neat beard is as black as the bottom of a well, shot through with a thin streak of white. Wide, alert eyes, the same shade of pale, summertime blue as Lia's, sparkle beneath overhanging, bushy brows.

As we approach, Lia's grip tightens even more, and I hear her draw in a long breath. It is he whom she fears.

"Father. It is so good to see you again. I have missed you, and prayed to the gods every day for your safety," Lia says, letting go of my hand to take both of his. She stands on her toes to place a daughterly kiss on his cheek.

Argus Cho breaks off staring at me long enough to kiss her in turn, then returns his attention to me. Unlike many of his guests, he does not flinch away or drop his gaze when his eyes meet mine. "Lia. Thank the gods for your return. When I heard from Headmaster Ceantes you had gone, I was so worried." His voice is big, like the rest of him, rolling out in the modulated tones of a trained courtier.

Or a mage, my sister reminds me. *Argus Cho is a legend among them, one of the few who has mastered not just one but two of the elemental arts.*

Lia gestures for me to come forward and I approach. Up close, I can see Argus's coat is embroidered with tiny characters; they are the same serpentine runes which adorn Lia's raiment, mixed together with different, more jagged-edged symbols.

Fire magic, my sister whispers, *the deadliest and most unpredictable of the elemental arts. It is said*

the power of pyromancy is so destructive and difficult to master that only a handful of initiates can ever be trusted with its deeper mysteries. That Argus Cho has mastered it is impressive, but when one considers he is also the current Master of the College of Elemental Air...

"Sir, it is indeed an honor," I say, offering my hand, palm down. Cho surprises me by grasping it in his and shaking it, as if I were a man. Several people nearby murmur in response, their whispered words overlaying my sister's own displeased hiss.

"I am overjoyed you could join us this evening," he says, sounding anything but. "I wanted to thank you personally for bringing my daughter back to me. I, and my family, am in your debt."

"I ... it is my honor to be of assistance to you and yours. No obligation exists between us, save that of friendship between our households," I say, remembering my manners at the last moment. I touch my brow, then my heart, before curtsying briefly, just deep enough to show my sincerity. Argus raises his eyebrows at my response.

"May it endure for generations," he replies, properly. He grasps my shoulders and leans close to kiss my cheeks. "I did not know you were raised at court. Who was your teacher?" he murmurs into my ear.

"I have never had the honor of attending court, sir. My mother was my only teacher," I say, unhelpfully. I do not know if he will recognize my family name, but he might. I am still a woman wanted for murder, I must remember, as if forgetting my crimes were possible.

Argus favors me with another long stare, waiting for me to give my family name, no doubt. Then, when I remain silent, he shrugs and introduces me to the rest of his entourage.

They are mages all, representatives from all four of the elemental colleges. I see a man at the back of the group, observing us. He is small and unassuming, dressed in midnight blue velvet. His spare, limp brown hair contrasts with the extravagant coifs all around. His eyes are of muddy brown, like a dog's. Cho introduces him last.

"And this is the Count Jurgen Savard. May I present the lady Kirin of ... well, of the north I suppose. The count is the emperor's representative tonight, since he could not be with us this evening."

Even I recognize the name: Savard; the emperor's spymaster, leader of the Gray Circle. Out in the bustle of the City, beneath the sun and the sky, the idea of a secret police was almost laughable, but now, seeing the man in the flesh, I am not so sure.

The count takes my hand and brushes his lips across my knuckles. He looks up into my eyes and I see him draw back ever so slightly. His gaze is like a scale, weighing and appraising. His voice, when he speaks, is high-pitched, soft as a woman's, and I am forced to lean forward to hear him.

"Charmed, milady, charmed. We were all so concerned about Master Cho's daughter. Yes, yes, so very worried. It's good to have her back among us, where she belongs."

Lia smiles at his words, as she has countless times already at other similar well-wishes, but I see that her good humor still conceals some deeper fear. I mouth empty pleasantries to Savard until Argus moves us along.

I try to stay close to her, but the swirl of people conspires to separate us. I answer each new greeting properly, only occasionally prompted by my sister's hissed reminders, but my heart is not in the exercise. Soon I find myself at the edge of the room. Amongst the shadowed columns ringing the dance floor I allow my shoulders to drop. My head throbs, and I rub my neck, wincing at their stiffness.

"Ah, the bright, shining court. So lovely, and corrupt. You do well to spurn their advances," someone says behind me.

I turn, and see a man standing in the shadow of a column. Like Savard, he wears dark velvet, his vest and sleeves trimmed with silver piping. A cameo sparkles at his throat, nestled within his high collar. Unlike most of the men, he wears no lace and his long fingers are devoid of jewelry, save for a single golden ring on his left thumb.

He walks towards me and offers me wine in a crystal goblet. He is fine-boned and slender, with surprisingly wide shoulders and narrow hips. His eyes are deep-set and intense, nestled in a web of crinkled flesh, curiously old for such a young-seeming man. In the dim light I cannot make out their color, but they are certainly dark, brown or black.

"I'm not spurning anyone. Yet," I say, taking the proffered glass. I take a minuscule sip for politeness' sake.

"Of course not," he replies, his thin lips twisting into a self-conscious smile. It does not reach those piercing eyes. "So you are Lia Cho's mysterious companion. I couldn't help but notice Master Cho introducing you to everyone."

His eyes scan the room. A moment later, he nods towards someone, a gesture so small it is almost invisible. "Don't look now, but someone seems to have taken an interest in you."

I follow his gaze and see Count Savard, standing in a small knot of faintly glowing women. His dog-brown eyes flicker towards me, then quickly away. A moment later he looks back again. Seeing I have noticed him, he inclines his head towards me, then returns his attention to the woman speaking to him.

"Tell me," asks the dark-clad man, "what do you think of the emperor's spymaster?"

"Count Savard?" I say, taking a long sip to give me time to think of an answer. I search his face for some clue as to what he is looking for, but all I see is mild interest.

Say something trivial; he will expect nothing else. None would dare speak openly of a man like him here.

"He is ... not what I expected," I manage to say.

"Oh? And what would that be?"

"You know the stories. I wouldn't expect such dramatic gossip concerning a man so, well..."

"Ordinary looking?"

"Yes," I agree, glad he has said the words first. "If Master Cho had not told me who he was, I probably wouldn't have even noticed him."

"Not being noticed would be a good trait in a spy, I'd think." He gestures towards the count. "Make no mistake, though: you will never feel that one's eyes on you, but he sees everything. Or his underlings do. And they could be anyone."

He must be drunk to speak this way. Best to end this conversation now, before he says something else that might get back to Savard. Stop leading him on.

"Why would he care?" I ask, deliberately ignoring her. Her bleat of outrage makes me smile. I toy with my pendant, my fingers tracing around the silver coin. "After all, I'm just a soldier."

"Just? Are you now?" he asks, his eyebrow raised. Despite the almost comical exaggeration, the question sends a tiny thrill down my back.

"Of course," I reply, dropping my hand. "What else would I be?"

"Well, forgive me for being blunt, but you share a house with the daughter of the head of the College of Elemental Air; a woman who has been groomed since birth to inherit the title, by the way, and who is every bit her father's match in power and talent. Or so it is said," he finishes with a shrug. "Either way, can you really say that you're surprised by Cho's and Savard's attention? Or that people are talking about you?"

"I think you may be exaggerating the depth of their interest," I say striving to sound casual even as something tightens in my chest.

"Of course they're interested. With your mysterious past, coupled with your stunning beauty and ... how can I say it? Exotic eyes ... they're quite helpless to resist. When Lia went missing, I hear that Cho's rage was immense."

"Rage? I heard him tell Lia that he was worried. The Mor—"

"Oh, indeed he was. Worried sick, I suppose. But angry even more. She defied his will when she left the safety of the College, you see. He thought that there, in the north, amongst some of the most powerful mages, she, and his dynasty would be safe. But then she left, and then you—"

"Brought her back to him," I finish. I nod as pieces click together: Argus Cho's obvious displeasure with me; Lia's nervousness at meeting him.

"Yes, indeed. You could have taken her anywhere. Disappeared into the wild and survived for years, if what I've heard about your woodcraft is even half true. Kept her hidden from the Mor until the enemy decided to give up on this most recent ... unpleasantness. Instead, you brought her into the thick of the fighting."

"But, she said she wanted to come here to assist with his defense of the Armitage," I say, wondering as I mouth the words why I care about justifying myself to him. "I only wanted to help," I finish, awkwardly. I take a long swallow of my wine, draining the glass.

"Of course you did. Of course." He reaches out and pats my arm with his long-fingered hand. I look at it, notice the golden ring is a signet, its face turned inwards, towards his palm, hidden from my sight. "And, for what it's worth, I think what you did was amazing."

"And what do you know of what I have done?" I ask, not trying to hide the skepticism in my voice.

"Those who witnessed Lia's ... who witnessed your run through the enemy lines were amazed," he replies with a shrug. "The tale, naturally, spread. I know many of your company died in the attempt, and for that I am truly sorry. But afterwards, I tried to keep track of what happened to everyone." His contradictory eyes meet mine. "Especially you."

A warm rush goes through me at his flattery. It is mixed with the barest hint of something else, something vaguely unpleasant, like the too-sweet odor of decay which sometimes floats above the scent of flowers at a funeral. "Me? Why? Why would anybody care about me?"

"Oh, curiosity, I suppose," he says with a shrug. "Plus, and I hope it doesn't offend you to hear me say it, but right from the start there were ... rumors ... of your beauty. It intrigued me."

I feel a blush creeping along the back of my neck, even as my sister snorts in amused contempt. *Oh, please, she barks. This one would call a one-legged fishwife a princess if he found himself companionless on a festival night. Mark my words: his fascination will last just as long as it takes you to pull your skirts back down.*

I bristle at her comment but remain silent. It will not do to begin whispering to myself before this man.

"Now you show your true colors, sir," I say. "Always it comes down to beauty with a man. And yet, so often, such assertions seem to evaporate, like dew, in the morning. It does not help your cause that I know full well what I look like, and can recognize the empty flattery in your praise."

The stranger pauses, as if reevaluating me. He smiles, the expression more bittersweet than charming now, and says, "Do you truly think so? Interesting that you cannot see what is so obvious to others."

"And what would that be?"

"What you really are," he says, draining his own glass. His smile deepens, almost lupine now, the grin of a predator.

I flinch, dropping my eyes and raising my glass, trying to give myself time to ponder his intentions, but it is empty, and only makes me look more nervous. "You ... you have me at a disadvantage, sir. You have my name, and seem to know so much about me, but I don't know yours."

"Of course. How rude of me. I am Rath, youngest son of Tomas Lan." He gives me an affected courtier's bow, folding himself gracefully over one outstretched leg. Somehow, despite the contortions, he does not spill his wine.

The Lans; I remember the name, my sister says. She, too sounds troubled and distracted. They are ... a very old family. One of the Founders. Mother said they hit hard times a few generations back—something about some unfortunate investments that did not work out if I remember correctly—but they were restored to favor when Emperor Berthold took the throne.

"Milady?" Rath says. "Something troubles you?"

I shake my head. The harsh, predatory leer is gone, so completely that I wonder if I really saw it in the first place. He cocks his head, as if he does not understand the depth of my reaction, once again every bit the mildly interested and faintly amused courtier.

"Tell me of your home," he says, gesturing for a servant to bring us fresh glasses.

"I ... it is a fishing village, far to the north. You wouldn't know it," I say.

"Try me. I do so love old maps, particularly of the north. All those valleys and glaciers and such. Lovely country, or so I hear. I have never been, of course, but if I had known the wilderness was home to such beauty, I would have tried harder to visit." His eyes roam down my body, languidly tracing the glowing lines of the naraja like fingertips. They trail lower, finally coming to rest at the point of my bodice. I feel a blush warming my ears.

"Surely it is a place much too insignificant to merit the attention of such a sophisticated and cultured man," I reply, hoping that the flattery will cause him to drop his eyes. Guilt mixes with the warm flush, sitting against my skin like cold sweat: chill and distasteful. I look across the room for Lia, but she is still with

her father and another man, young and clean-limbed, dressed in a robe of rich blue, oblivious to our exchange.

I feel more than see him turn his eyes to follow mine. "He watches his daughter like a hawk, does he not?" Rath asks.

"Yes," I say, grateful for the change of subject. "I wonder why? She is a woman grown, tested in battle and proven in all other ways."

"Argus Cho is every bit as much politician as mage," Rath says promptly. "He has much invested in his only daughter, make no mistake. That's why he cares so much about you, of course."

"I still don't see why. Mistress Cho and I are good friends. What we went through together ... it's natural she would want me near her. And I'm happy to stay close, if it makes her feel safe."

Rath favors me with a long look, then shrugs. "Friendship is a wonderful thing. Especially between women. I'm envious of your closeness. You are truly lucky in your ... relationship."

"Thank—"

Before I can finish, Rath continues, "But you must always remember that everything you do will be seen, then gossiped about, until it finds its way back to Argus Cho. It's just the way it is with the court, nothing personal. Mistress Lia, bless her, has always been so worried about his good opinion. Why wouldn't she be? He is her father after all. If one were to do anything to garner his disapproval, well..."

He allows the unspoken threat to hang.

"Now then," he says, "if you will not tell me of your home then I have no choice but to puzzle it out for myself. I do so love a good mystery." His queer, dark eyes fix on mine. Tiny maroon sparks dance in them, reflected firelight maybe. He seems completely untroubled by my black eyes; if anything, he looks intrigued.

"Let's see," Rath says, his eyes staring into mine as if trying to read my thoughts. "You certainly have appropriate manners, that much is certain. Trained in all the proper courtesies, but the forms are somewhat archaic. Subtleties in the language and such. Your skin and hands are as rough as a field hand's, and your nails are trimmed short, so the stories about your being a scout must be true, as improbable as they seem, but your fine, high cheekbones show good breeding in your pedigree..."

"Now you make me sound like a horse," I interrupt, crossly. I do not understand what he means by this examination, and I do not like it.

"Forgive me. I fancy myself a bit of a detective, and I fear I've insulted you. I meant no harm by it. I suppose too long an exposure to the court has warped my own good intentions."

"I ... I accept your apology, good sir," I say, falling back on propriety. "I should not have taken offense where none was meant. Now, if you will excuse me—"

"One last thing, if I may," he says, placing a hand on my arm. It is hot and dry, like a fever victim's, and despite myself, I pause. He withdraws a slender card, white as snow, from his sleeve.

"If you need anything; anything at all, please don't hesitate to call on me. I have had a lifetime to learn the ways of the court, and I daresay I can help you. If, of course, you feel you need it. I'd hate for you to inadvertently blunder into some bored nobleman's or noblewoman's pathetic attempt to curry favor by diminishing our esteemed Argus Cho."

I take the card, automatically, stuffing the stiff linen into a sleeve. "Thank you, sir, but I daresay I can manage. After the Mor, this seems like a weak sort of peril."

"It isn't," he says, deadly serious. "And, trust me, after what you did on the wall, well, you have their interest piqued."

I turn aside to leave, then freeze. "What ... what I did on the wall? How do you...?"

"Oh, everyone knows," he says, dismissively. "Did you truly think that saving the life of the noble Lord Garrett would go unnoticed? Brilliant work, and so timely. Why, if we'd lost yet another Head of a House..." He shivers a bit at his own thought. "Perhaps you might share with me the secret of such a marvelous ability some evening. Over dinner?" He smiles at me, his leer now that of a seasoned raconteur. Not for the first time I ask myself what I am getting into with this man, even as my traitorous body responds with a fresh blush.

"Kirin! There you are!" Lia calls out from behind, startling me. I drop my eyes and flinch away from Rath. My blush deepens, my ears burning so hot that even a blind woman could see them.

"Kirin, is everything all right? You look troubled," Lia says, forming her words more carefully than usual. She has a glass of wine in her hand, nearly empty. I know it is not her first, or even her third.

"I will excuse myself. But please do think about my offer," Rath says. He sketches a brief bow before withdrawing, muttering polite nothings to Lia over his shoulder. The crowd swallows him completely.

"His offer?" Lia asks, a crease marring the skin between her brows. She smiles, but I know her well enough to recognize the tension in it. "Gathering admirers already, are we?"

"It was nothing," I say. "Just the usual unwelcome attention from unmarried men. I'm sure you know all about that."

"The married ones can be no better, you know," she says with a very un-Lia-like snort. "Why, just now, Horace McGrath practically drooled down the front of my gown. His wife gave me the rudest stare, as if it were my fault. But I suppose she really cannot be blamed, seeing as how Lord McGrath was recently caught red-handed dallying with—"

"I'm sorry. You needed me for something?" I ask, cutting off the gossip I can tell is about to ensue. My sister groans in disappointment.

"Oh, yes, of course, I wanted you to meet an old friend of mine. His name is Westyn of the house of Obarre. We played together as children. Oh, and I wanted you to meet my father's banker. He says he has some advice for how you can invest your salary. True, it is not much, but we—you, I mean—must plan ahead, yes?" I nod and she leads me back into the crowd.

She introduces me to the young man in blue I saw her with earlier. Westyn is two years Lia's senior, a recently-graduated hydromancer. His eyes seldom leave her, lingering on her face and form, even when she is not directly addressing him. I remind myself that even rich and powerful men, trained in the arts of abjuration, are still just men, and that his glances don't mean anything.

As I stand with Lia and Westyn, their bright reminiscences flowing around me like river water around a boulder, I find myself looking for Rath more than I would like. I feel the tracks of unseen eyes on my skin, real or imagined I do not know. When I look up, I often find Argus Cho watching me. Always, his eyes are as hard and impenetrable as the stone walls he defends, giving away nothing.

Hours later, I stand on one of the manor's many balconies. A breeze threads chill fingers through my hair,

caressing the back of my neck like the cold hands of a corpse. The Armitage looms above me, lit now, like every night, by the light of innumerable fires. Occasionally, some event, an enemy attack or one of the elementalists' counter-attacks, sends a rolling wave of thunder across the rooftops of the nighttime City.

Up there, men and woman fight and die against the Mor, while just below these bright, shining folk revel. Not for the first time, nor the last, I suspect, I wonder what I am doing here. For once, my sister does not chastise me for my scandalous thoughts.

Laughter swells behind me, mixed with polite applause, as the musicians begin a new tune. I hear my name called: Lia, asking me to join in the dance. I set my shoulders and turn towards the open doors, moving as if towards my own execution.

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CHAPTER NINE

It is sunny and warm on the day that the 103rd draws customs duty. The men, for the most part, are overjoyed at the assignment, and the announcement is greeted with cheers and smiles. As soon as Sergeant Cyr breaks the news, the men begin gathering their weapons and other gear, chatting and smiling as they do. It is the first time I have ever seen them react to orders with such enthusiasm.

"What does that mean, customs duty?" I ask Malthus, a tanner's son from the City's western side. He has been a great boon to me so far, instructing me on many things, from the expectations of the army and its officers, to the geography and practicalities of living in the Imperial City.

"It means that we won't have to spend the week atop this bloody wall being shot at for one," he replies with a gap-toothed grin. "Come on: grab your kit and your ammunition. This is a choice assignment, you'll see."

I move to comply, slinging my quiver across my back. My unstrung bow I carry with me, like a staff. Soon, I hear the sergeant bellowing for us to fall into ranks.

The 103rd marches out from the wall with the sun on our faces. It warms our backs as we make our way south along the Gold Road, and soon I am sweating in my leather breastplate. It feels strange to be walking through the City while on duty, someplace other than atop the wall. I look back at it as we march away, and frown.

"Come now, Kirin," Malthus says. "The Mor'll still be there when we return. Don't fret."

I turn away with a rueful shake of my head. My first chaotic week on the wall left little time to get acquainted with the men in my company, a situation made worse by the rumors of sorcery that followed. I hope that time will lessen the wariness I have seen in the men's eyes. So far, it has not.

Malthus is the exception. Ever since that first day, he has fought beside me on the firing line or toiled with me at whatever duty the army has seen fit to assign. If he is bothered by the whispered rumors, he gives no sign.

Damn the priests, and their fear-mongering. The goddess Shanira is not the only power in the world that can heal. The proof is in Lia's intact hands and Garrett's life. But as long as their dogma brands me a heretic for using my power, I must be careful, and conceal its existence whenever I can.

And what else could you do? my sister asks. Used the healing skills learned from your mistress in Luran's hospital? Noble as that is, you know your heart would not be satisfied while there are Mor still left to kill. Besides, such a posting carries its own dangers.

She is right. Just imagining having to spend all my time amongst the wounded and the dead, constantly tempted to employ the power of the blood magic or, worse, the sight in my secret eye, makes me shiver.

No. It is better this way. I belong atop the wall, bow in hand and a target at the point of my arrow. Things are simpler that way. Clearer. And the temptations to use my abhorrent powers are far, far fewer.

It takes us the better part of the morning to reach our destination, wending our way through the crowds and carriages. The Gold Road is the Empire's main thoroughfare, a mighty artery of trade and commerce, connecting the Imperial City with the fertile breadbasket of the south. I know from my childhood geography lessons that the Road runs alongside the river Mos for nearly a thousand miles, through the prairies and deserts of the southern lands, until its end in the faraway city of Shul.

Where the road meets the natural barrier of the Northwatch Cliffs, it expands across the plateau into a paved, open space that dwarfs even the Imperial Courtyard just inside Lion's Mouth. Buildings line the flagstone-surfaced court—countless inns, warehouses and office buildings, all dedicated to servicing the millions of travelers that pass this way.

Even this late in the season, with winter's unmistakable chill in the air, the yard is choked with people and animals. I see the garb of dozens of cultures, from the thick, white furs of the Vaenir, denizens of the eternal white fields far to the north, to the gauzy brilliance of the nomadic southern tribes. Herds of cattle, sheep and camels bray and moo, their low cries contrasting with the higher-pitched calls of six-limbed woodstriders and shaggy-coated aurochs. A thick stew of human odor and language floats through the air, scenting it with a heady, baffling melange.

And everywhere, as far as the eye can see, are the wagons, in every possible variety, from the simple to the bizarre, some small enough to be pulled by a single mule, others titanic, sixteen-wheeled rolling fortresses that can only be pulled by an entire herd of aurochs.

Cranes hang over the cliff side, their skeletal arms as thick as a leafless forest. The mammoth constructs rise into the winter sky, leaning over the sheer drop. Men scurry at their bases, leading teams of harnessed oxen around circular tracks. As the oxen walk, their movement turns mighty wooden wheels, through which thick cables run. They pass through a bewildering array of blocks and pulleys, then up to the crane arms above.

As I watch, a huge pallet, larger than a house, heaves over the top of the cliff, dangling from a web of cable. Men swarm the load like ants. It is hoisted into a fenced-off enclosure guarding the base of the crane, one of a dozen or more spaced along the cliff-side. The moment the pallet touches down on the flagstones, the stevedores begin loosening the myriad ropes and cables that secure the load. Empty wagons stand ready outside the fence, waiting to load the cargo for transport.

Sergeant Cyr bellows for us to turn, and we move to do his bidding. The crowd, reluctantly it seems, parts for us, opening a space leading towards one of the fenced-off oases. As we approach, I see that a rough queue has formed outside the tall iron gate.

Soldiers, members of the 43rd Infantry by their insignia and banners, stand inside the bars, looking bored. Their officers stand beside sharp-faced men and women dressed in the maroon of the Imperial bureaucracy. As we approach, the soldiers command the caravan waiting for admission to move aside so we can enter. When we have passed through the gate, the men of the 43rd close the barricades, shutting off access to the loading area inside the fence. The crowd grumbles at the delay.

Sergeant Cyr greets his counterpart, and presents his orders. The other officer nods and accepts the paperwork, then commands his men to fall in for final inspection. The infantrymen form ranks beside us, and we stand for fifteen minutes, as the officers of the 43rd perform their final inspection.

All the while, the crowd gathered outside the gate stares in. About half are obviously foreign, tradespeople or caravan runners from gods-know-where, but the rest are dressed in the fashions of the Imperial City. I frown at the sight, and nudge Malthus with my elbow.

"What?" he whispers, his eyes straight and level.

"Why are so many people gathered?" I whisper back.

"Trade never sleeps," he replies, quoting one of the City's most beloved mottos. "Thanks to the cranes, the bounty of the south will flow up, into the City, all winter."

"But these people are waiting to be taken down, into the lowlands. Look at them: many are just laborers. Or craftsmen. And they have their families with them."

I nod towards a couple, leading a brood of six children. A hand-cart is beside them, piled high with a trunk and several bundles wrapped in what looks like carpets. A dog barks at the crowd, straining at the rope tied around its neck. The eldest daughter, a willowy girl of no more than thirteen, dressed in a pretty, if simple, flowered skirt, curses it and orders it to be still. The dog, overexcited by the smells and sights all around, does not listen, and strains against its leash until it chokes.

Malthus shrugs. "Perhaps they desire to spend the winter in warmer climes. Not that it will matter, of course."

I open my mouth to ask him what he means, then I remember. By order of the emperor, none can leave the city. It must not seem as if the populace is fleeing the capital, lest our enemies feel they are getting the upper hand. This is why we are here, after all: to maintain order and to assure that the emperor's will is enforced.

I shake my head at the waste of it all. If any cared to ask me, I could tell the emperor's strategists that the Mor do not care about a moral victory, nor are they concerned with the resilience of our will. All that matters to them is tearing down the wall.

Soon, the infantry troop files out, headed back to their barracks. Sergeant Cyr gives us our final duty assignments and explains our rotation schedule, then splits us up into groups. We man our posts, our weapons strung and ready, and re-open the gates.

From sunup to sundown we are to provide security for the bureaucrats responsible for approving and recording the myriad forms and permissions required for cargo or passengers to go up or down the cliff. They, in turn, collect taxes and customs fees for all cargo which comes into the city.

We are to work in four-hour shifts, changing twice, then take a four-hour break for meals and sleep before starting it all over again. My first assignment is on gate duty. Other members of the 103rd inspect the cargo and conveyances that will ride down on the pallets. Passengers have their papers carefully checked; most are handed over to the Imperial functionaries to the accompaniment of the sound of clinking coins. Those bereft of the proper bribe are, as a rule, denied.

I stand inside the gate, beside Malthus and six other archers. The mood of the crowd is ugly and restless. The inspection process is time-consuming, for Cyr has commanded the company to carefully check every wagon, bale and crate for stowaways.

"In times of war, the weak-willed and the cowardly will try to avoid their duty to the emperor," one of the bureaucrats explains, seeing my barely-concealed frustration at the slowness of the process. "Surely you agree that all must contribute to the glorious victory that will be ours?"

"I ... it's not for me to say, sir," I reply.

The functionary shrugs and turns back to the dark-skinned man before him. More papers are passed across the desk. Again I hear the jingle of coins, this time from a silken bag. The inspector hefts the sack, judging its weight, then nods to the man beside him. The bag disappears, dropped into a maroon sleeve. The dark-skinned man smiles.

"Let them pass," the inspector calls out, scribbling his name on the bottom of the forms.

The archers move aside as the caravan drivers make ready to assist the stevedores with the loading.

Outside the fence, I hear the crowd grumble and shift. Their stares are rapacious and hostile, missing nothing. I am sure that some among them saw, or heard, the jingling bag.

I look over at the family I noticed earlier. They are closer to the gate, but still several groups back. They sit on the flagstones beside their tiny cart, wearily passing a skin of water. The father leans back against the wheel of the cart and closes his eyes, wiping his brow with a ragged, stained sleeve. They do not look like the kind of family that has a clinking bag of their own.

The mother unwraps a heel of bread and breaks it, passing it to the children. The eldest daughter holds the dog's rope and stares off, across the vast drop of the Northwatch cliffs.

They are still there, hours later, when we close and lock the gates for the evening. The father joins the loud, complaining throng just outside. His daughter stands at his side, her wide eyes silently beseeching us to let her pass. The bureaucrat ignores her.

"If you are in a hurry you can try walking down the cliff path to the Sunrise Gate," the functionary calls out. "This lift must be reserved for military and essential cargo use in the evening hours. Now move back. Move back, in the name of the emperor!"

The crowd reluctantly moves aside, to allow the crane workers and stevedores to depart. Their replacements file through the crowd. They look nervous.

With the gate secured, we split into watch groups. My team files off to the watch house, where we eat a sparse meal and try to rest. I feel like I've barely drifted off when Malthus nudges me and says we have to go back. When we return, the cranes are busy once again, hauling a seemingly endless series of pallets loaded with crates and livestock up the night-dark cliff.

We walk the perimeter until the small hours before dawn. The family stays in line, crowded together for warmth beside their worldly possessions. The dog, tied to a wheel, growls and barks at any who come too close. Good. One can never be too careful when relying on the kindness of strangers.

* * * *

"But, it's all I have. Please, sir—"

The Imperial agent sighs and waves his hand. "It is not a matter of money; it is a matter of orders, and we have ours. You do not have the proper papers."

The family I have been watching since yesterday stands before the bureaucrats' table. Between them lies a scattering of coins, copper mostly, but a few of gleaming silver. It is a paltry sum, a laborer's wages for a month, possibly two.

"Please, sir," the father tries again, obviously struggling with his temper. "We have been waiting in line since yesterday. We need to get south, to Khellut, as soon as we can. My wife's father is ill, and we must get to him before he—"

The maroon-clad man eyes the family's sparse collection of possessions and smiles. It is not a benevolent expression.

"Dying father is it? I'm sure. Nevertheless, I'm afraid that it's quite impossible. Things are tough all over, and no one can shirk their duty to the emperor in these trying times." He pushes back the pathetic heap of coins and looks past the father's shoulder. "Next!"

"I beg you!" the father says, not moving. "Please! At least allow my wife, and the children to—"

The bureaucrat gestures to Cyr. The sergeant frowns, but a moment later flashes a hand sign. I see the six archers that have drawn gate duty this morning tense, then slowly draw their arrows. I turn aside from the caravan wagon I am helping inspect as they set the missiles to their strings.

"Step aside!" the functionary commands, his voice shrill, like a woman's.

The father stands for a few moments more, his thick laborer's hands flexing, glowering at the archers. Then, reluctantly, he scoops the coins off the table and backs away. When he is three steps away, he spits on the flagstones, then turns to grasp the handles of his cart.

The family retreats outside the gate. The mother struggles with tears. The children are not as strong as she, and weep softly, with frustration or fear I do not know.

I stifle the urge to go to them and explain that they have nothing to fear. The Armitage is mighty, defended by the force of the army and the elemental mages. It will not fall, I am sure of it. It just ... cannot.

We admit the next group in line, a textile merchant from Shaat. His wagons are empty, save for some luxury foods and metalworking supplies. No doubt he means to use the shortage caused by the army's requisition of all such items to turn a handsome profit back home. We point out the contraband to the Imperial agent.

"Is good, is good. Have papers," the caravan master says. He pushes across a leather portfolio crammed with documents. The sides bulge with something else, a roundish object, which clinks as the portfolio is shifted. The Imperial inspector smiles.

I turn aside, weary of it all. Rumor has it that Sergeant Cyr will receive a portion of the bribes collected here, which he will distribute amongst the men. Malthus has already told me of his plans for his "bonus," as he calls it: a decorative fountain for his wife's beloved garden. No wonder he and the men were thrilled to be assigned to customs duty.

The caravan master is still working out the final details of his bribe when a commotion draws my attention back to the gate. I see a group of horsemen, household guards by their flashy livery, leading a small group of wagons. At their head is a carriage, windows shuttered against the dust and the stares of the throng. I spy the crest emblazoned on the guards' chests, a pair of crossed mallets on a field of scarlet, but do not recognize it.

The Whelans, of Turksbury, my sister informs me. One of the founding families. Shipping and mining are their primary interests. I overheard at Argus Cho's party that their middle son, Reginald, just married the youngest daughter of Lath Mason. It seems as if—

"What's going on there?" I ask Malthus, cutting off the impending stream of gossip.

He follows my gesture. At the gate, the horsemen are demanding loudly that they be allowed to come inside. The others in the line that they have passed send up a frustrated cry.

"I don't know," Malthus replies with a shrug. "Sounds like they want a ride down."

"Then they should get in line, or make their way down the cliff road to the Sunrise Gate like everyone else."

Malthus smiles at my words, and shakes his head. "If you want to tell them to ride the thirty miles or more that will take them out of their way, be my guest, but I'll not. And there's little chance that a House Major like that will wait in line with the common folk—wealth has its privileges after all."

One of the inspectors rises from his seat and approaches the gate. The guards open it, and the man moves to the side of the carriage, bobbing comically as he tries to walk and bow at the same time. I see him, speaking with someone inside.

I scowl as the crowd moves forward. They are angry, calling out in a dozen tongues. The words I can understand are laced with profanity.

"Malthus," I begin.

"I see. Come on." He picks up his bow and moves towards the gate. Others in the troop have come to the same conclusion, and are drifting forward alongside us.

As I approach the gate, I see the family that was turned aside earlier. The father stands at the front of the crowd, shouting that the carriage must get in line. Beside him, his wife screams along, just as loud. Even the children catcall and jeer, waving their tiny fists at the liveried guards and their horses. The girl with the dog is shrieking along with them, still clutching the rope tied around the animal's straining neck.

The Imperial inspector nods at something said from the carriage, watching the crowd nervously. Three members of the 103rd are with him, their hands on their short swords. They look every bit as scared as they do in the middle of a Mor attack, and with good reason: the crowd is turning ugly. I can feel the malice in the air, heavy and imposing, like a storm just before the lightning breaks.

"Surely he's not stupid enough to take a bribe out in the open like this," I say to Malthus. "The best thing to do would be to tell them to come back tonight, when the line sitters are mostly asleep."

"Do the inspectors strike you as the most intelligent men you've ever met?" Malthus asks. I answer him by setting an arrow to my string.

And what do you mean to do with that? my sister asks. Will you really shoot into a frightened crowd, whose only crime was expecting fairness? Will you really defend such a corrupt weakling?

I pause, then sigh. I cannot say.

Before I can come to a decision, many things happen, all in close sequence. A hand comes out of the carriage curtains, holding a white cloth, a handkerchief or lady's sachel. The inspector reaches for it, obviously reluctant to accept it under the gaze of the crowd. His fingers fumble at the cloth. The white bundle slips from his grasp, falling towards the flagstones.

As it tumbles through the air, the loose knot securing it slips open. Time seems to slow. I see the gleam of ruddy gold as the tied ends slip free...

Coins spill across the courtyard in a ringing, bouncing flood. It is more money than a laborer, or shopkeeper, could expect to earn in ten years, if ever. The sound of the money's fall cuts through the shouts and cries, momentarily silencing them. Every eye turns towards the golden spill.

"Fuck," I hear Malthus mumble, startlingly clear.

Utter havoc erupts. The people in the crowd nearest the inspector throw themselves forward, past the guards' horses. Their hands scramble at the flagstones, snatching up fallen coins.

Those behind them give a roar of frustration, either at the revealed bribe or their inability to get to the fallen coins, and surge forward. The horses, already nervous from the shouting all around them, whirl in place, biting anyone who draws close, as their riders struggle to control them.

Those closest to the gold lash out at the ones behind, scrabbling for the coins while trying to push away others. The pushing swiftly degenerates into a brawl, a swirling melee of waving fists and yelling men and women.

I hold an arrow on my string, unsure what to do. I see the three men in my company, short swords drawn, attempting to hurry the Imperial inspector back to the gates. The naked blades serve as sufficient warning to make most, but not all, turn aside.

"Corrupt bastard!" I hear a man scream, the cry audible over the cacophony. I see a brawny arm flash up, a knife glittering in one clenched fist, and a moment later the inspector crumples, disappearing into the crowd.

The archers with him stop, struggling to hoist him up. The crowd closes in on them, most still scuffling but some retaining sufficient command of their wits to remember their goal.

The cranes.

"Form up!" I shout to the other archers inside the gate. "Form up and draw shafts!" Beside me, I see Malthus nod and raise his weapon, his arrow half-drawn in a mute promise of violence.

I hear others running up behind me. Soon a dozen other members of the 103rd are beside me, a massed line of death for any foolish enough to charge our position. More are coming, at least a dozen more, spilling out of the day barracks or running from their inspection posts near the crane pallets.

Outside the gate, the impending riot swells, gaining strength as others run towards the commotion, and are swept inside. The mounted guards have their weapons out now, and swing them back and forth just over the heads of the crowd. Their mounts whirl in place, whinnying, sometimes rearing up to menace the rioters with flashing hooves.

For an instant, the violence abates. The roar of the crowd dims, as commoner and guard assess each other. I feel a moment's optimism this might stop here; reinforcements are doubtless headed this way. As the crowd shifts back, I see our soldiers, lying on the ground, beside the crouching form of the Imperial inspector.

I hear a child scream, somewhere behind the front ranks of the glowering crowd. A dog barks, its excited yips approaching. I see men shift and look down as a small, furry shape lunges out from between their legs. A rope trails from its neck, whipping behind it as it runs. It clears the forest of legs and bounds towards one of the nervous horses. I see its tongue flash pink.

The horse, already on edge from the massed people all around, rears. Its rider curses and saws at the reins. The people in the front ranks push even further back, away from the huge animal. I see a small figure, dressed in a flowered skirt, push past them.

I see what is about to happen, just as I feel the bone-deep premonition, as impossible to ignore as the smell of rain before a cloudburst. Still, I whisper my denial, unsure if I speak to myself, or to the uncaring gods above.

"Gods, no."

I move towards the fence, even though I know it is already too late. The girl screams her dog's name and grabs for the trailing rope. Her fingers snag at its frayed end, just before the dog bounds up, nipping at the rearing horse's forelegs. I see its shadow fall across them, see the girl's eyes go wide as she realizes the danger looming over her. The iron-shod hooves descend.

Still rearing, the horse lashes out. Crimson splashes across the animal's pale gray fetlocks. The girl has time for one surprised scream, before she is driven to the stones. I hear the greenstick snap of bones.

Everything stops. The would-be rioters stand frozen, mouths open. Somewhere beside me a soldier whispers a curse.

Through the forest of bodies, I can just see the broken form in the flowered skirt. The dog stops barking and moves to her, whining. It bends and sniffs at her hand. She does not stir, does not move at all. I feel a sob catch in the back of my throat, painful as a hook.

"Get back!" Cyr bellows, shockingly loud.

I hear a horn and the clatter of hooves from beyond the rear edge of the crowd. Riders from the nearby Imperial garrison, or so I assume.

The rioters, hearing the approaching thunder, turn and flee, the mass shredding like fog in a stiff wind. I lose sight of the fallen girl instantly. The rider of the panicked horse finally manages to quiet his mount, and leads the animal back towards his companions.

Moments later it seems, the rioters are gone, the noble carriage has disappeared, leaving nothing but blood and bodies on the cobblestones. The girl, though, and her dog and family are gone, absorbed into the fleeing crowd. Their cart lies on its side, its contents scattered, plundered. Of the girl, all that is left is a smear of vibrant scarlet. "Corpsman!" Cyr shouts. "Corpsman! I need help here! Get these bloody gates open. Now!"

I react to the call instinctively, and move up with the others. I see the fallen guards, lying beside the quaking Imperial functionary. One is rising, cradling a shattered forearm, but the others do not move. I see red marks staining their surcoats and tunics, red and rounded. Knife wounds. As I watch, the guard with the broken arm reaches down and tries to help one of his fallen comrades, then screams as the motion sends a lance of agony through his shattered limb.

Inside, I feel the blood magic stir, stretching like a big cat waking from sleep.

"Where are my corpsmen?" Cyr bellows. "Someone fetch a priest!"

Cyr looks up, his eyes desperate, and fixes his gaze on me. His eyes beseech me for help, even as loathing and fear churn there. I see some of the other men looking at me now, asking me without words to help him. For an instant, I am tempted, and move forward. The blood magic rouses itself in my belly, keening with red hunger.

Then the reality of what I am about to do strikes me. Revulsion transfixes me, sharp and painful as an iron spike, and I reel back, gagging on bile. My stomach twists, not with the hot, slick desire of the blood magic, but from something deeper and more primal: pure, animal fear. The image of my son comes to me, of his eyes, so trusting, so innocent ... his eyes sheeting with scarlet as the delicate vessels there ruptured, one by one by one, overwhelmed by the alien vitality I stole from the Mor. It is all I can do to not scream.

No. I cannot. Cannot allow my perverted power to slide inside him. Cannot allow it out. What happened with Captain Garrett was instinct, a response to a moment of weakness. I cannot allow it to happen again.

I turn back, forcing my breathing to slow. Cyr calls out once more for a priest, and I look around, seeing if one is near. Let them save the wounded man. Besides, if I am caught using my power by one of

Shanira's followers, then I might as well confess myself a witch right now. I will be arrested and my property seized from Lia's house. She will be ruined by the scandal.

Inside, my sister breathes a small sound of disgust. I ignore it. I know full well the depths of my own hypocrisy; I do not need her help.

"Let the goddess of healing take care of her own," I whisper, both for her benefit and mine. "Let her keep the power over life and death that her worshipers guard so jealously. Through them she has made it quite clear that what lives inside me is an abomination."

"Kirin, what...?" Malthus whispers. He must have heard me. Shaken, I walk away, shaking my head, and do not stop until I reach the edge of the cliffs. Behind me, I hear Cyr screaming once more for help, for someone to come and save our fallen comrade.

There is nothing I can do, I say to myself. Nothing I can do. Against the Mor, yes, I will do anything, but this ... this I cannot do.

I stand there, looking out across the vast expanse of the south, and think of the fallen girl and her dog. For once, my sister is silent, and together we stand as tears slide down my chill cheeks.

For whom I cry for, I could not say.

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CHAPTER TEN

Two months pass. Two months of fighting atop the Armitage, sometimes for days at a time, standing shoulder to shoulder with the archers of the 103rd. Two months of arrows and fire; of explosions and screams and the smell of burning flesh.

Two months of returning home to the townhouse Lia has just now completed furnishing, transforming myself from the soldier I am atop the wall into the soft, privileged woman I am when with Lia. Two months of intense horror mix with equally intense bliss.

Autumn descends into the long chill of winter. Too soon the trees lining our quiet street are bare, black sentinels standing amongst their fallen cloaks of leaves. The first of the winter's snow floats down from the leaden clouds.

The drifting flakes are greeted by the cheers of the City's inhabitants. Surely, all say, the Mor cannot sustain their attack in such weather. I say nothing, hiding my scorn. They have not seen the Mor's supernatural strength and resilience; they do not know that snow is nothing to such as they. Compared to what we endured in the mountains, the early snow is like gentle rain.

Lia speaks often of her new responsibilities at the College of Air. She is given the title of Aeromancer, Second Degree, an honor almost unprecedented for one so young. The story of our run for the safety of the wall, as well as of her devastating effectiveness against the Mor, has spread through the ranks of the wall's defenders and their elementalists allies. Her ascension is her reward. Her new position keeps her busy with many duties, from administering the delicate tests of elemental aptitude to potential students, to arranging the training of the new batch of apprentices.

She likes working with the children, she admits, something that surprises her greatly, but me not at all. She would never allow a child to be hurt, I know, and this sense of responsibility gives her a depth of commitment which is obvious to all save herself. I think of her, standing behind me in my moment of temptation, when I almost brought back my dead son's ghost. Remember how she would have ended me if I had allowed such a travesty to occur. The thought comforts me, as it always does.

Nights are difficult when I am not on the wall. Lia's bed is too comfortable, the house too quiet. Every tiny noise wakes me and I often surge upright, pulling the covers off, exposing us to the chill. Lia assures me she does not care about her broken nights, but I cannot help but wonder. When it is very bad, when I have been forced to spend extra time atop the Armitage, or after someone in the company has been badly hurt, she holds me in her arms and sings to me, like she did on the day we met, until I finally drift away into unquiet sleep.

As bad as the restlessness is, however, the dreams are worse. More and more I am ripped from sleep, my body slicked with sweat, by nightmares of smoke and swirling sparks. Half-remembered images fill me with sick anxiety; visions of a giant half-formed thing, all raw fleshless muscle and pale-gleaming bone, rampaging through the streets. On these nights I creep from Lia's bed and return to my sparse room, there to spend the rest of the night wrestling alone with my pillow. When I can tell that sleep's dark angel will not find me again, I have no choice but to leave the stifling confines of our home and wander the streets.

I never worry about thieves on my midnight excursions; I am more than capable of defending myself from any human threat. Would-be attackers seem to sense this fact, for I am seldom, if ever, troubled, despite my fine cloak and unbound silver hair. Once, a ring of men, four of them, step from the shadows of an alley as I walk past. I see the sparkle of a razor-edged blade, a deadly promise of blood and pain, hear

their expectant laughter.

The men advance while I wait for their attack, reveling in the sensation of the blood magic writhing in my belly. I do not want to hurt them, I tell myself, but if they leave me no choice...

Before they can commit themselves, something, maybe my black eyes, maybe the predatory smile on my lips, alerts them. They melt back into the shadows, the promise of violence unfulfilled. I return home and fall into a deep, dreamless sleep. The next morning, I feel more at ease, more relaxed and satisfied, than I have in weeks.

The next morning I stride down the back stairs, my dressing gown flowing behind me. I am buoyant, invigorated. I enter the kitchen and see Lia, sitting at the table, a cup of tea before her. She is not dressed and her hair is still down on her shoulders. The late morning sun stretches across the floor in a dazzling wedge.

"You're here late," I say, surprised.

"I asked Mirriam to take my classes today," she says. "I wanted to talk to you."

"Oh? About what?" I shake the kettle, then pour more water into it before setting it on the stove. I hold my hands above the hot iron, grateful for the warmth.

Lia pushes out a chair and pats the seat. I drop into it with a sigh. I smile at her but she answers it with a frown. Unexpected lines crease her smooth forehead.

"Well, I'm glad you decided to take a day off," I say. Perhaps we can go to the market together. I hear they've just brought a caravan up the cliff filled with fruits from—"

"No. I mean, yes, we might. Later. But that is not why I am here. I wanted to talk to you about ... That is, I wanted you to know I have noticed ... Oh, gods damn it!" she says, raking her fingers through her hair.

My own smile evaporates like morning dew. Lia seldom swears. "What's wrong? Did something happen?" I put my hand on hers, my eyes seeking hers. The silence stretches, but I resist the impulse to keep talking; something tells me it will only make things more difficult for her.

"Why are you not happy?" she finally asks in a tiny voice.

I push down the reflex to laugh, limiting myself to a smile. "What are you talking about? I'm perfectly happy. Look at me. Don't you see me smiling?"

"You are not, I can tell. When you ... when you leave in the night, you always return to your own bed," she continues, still in that small voice. "I always wake when you go, and notice when you do not return."

"I'm sorry. I tried to not wake you. You're still just not used to sharing a bed; you'll get used to it. Urik used to snore like a bull with a head cold, especially when he'd been out at the tavern the night before. There were nights that I had to put my pillow—"

"It is not that," she interrupts. "You used to wake me in the middle of the night on purpose, remember? I looked forward to it. Sometimes so much that I had trouble falling asleep." A ghost of a smile traces itself across her lips. "But this is different. I can feel your restlessness. Something troubles you, but you will not tell me what it is. And last night, like many nights of late, you went out, and did not return until close to dawn."

"I ... some nights, I can just tell I won't be able to sleep. Walking calms my mind. I think too many years of hiking up and down trails has ruined me for city living," I say, intending the words to be said lightly, in jest, but they emerge sounding more serious than I had intended.

The kettle whistles and I rise. I pour the water into my cup, then set the tea strainer into the steaming surface. The smell of rose hips and chamomile reaches me, astringent and soothing.

"It's not you," I continue, returning to my seat. I squeeze her hand. "You're the thing I look forward to most when I'm away. When I'm on the wall, and the men are talking about their wives and sweethearts waiting for them below, all I can do is smile, because they have no idea what loveliness really is."

Lia smiles at the compliment, but the gesture seems reflexive, as if she does not believe me. She pauses, then asks in the smallest voice yet, "Is it me?"

"Is what you?"

"Is ... am I the cause of your displeasure? Because if so, I—"

"Gods, Lia, aren't you listening?" I say, my voice rising. Her meekness goads me, like a prong; she is stronger than this, I have seen it. "I'm not unhappy!"

"Then why do you go?" she shouts, her eyes finally meeting mine. They are wide, and so very blue, flashing not with lightning but anger. "What do you seek out there in the night when you are not here with me?"

"I'm not sneaking off to meet a lover, if that's what you mean. What, do you think I would—?"

"I do not know what to think, that is entirely the point! I do not know if you are going off to meet a man, or ... or another woman. You could be going off to the house of Liandra for one of her orgies for all I know! All I know is that many nights—most nights—when I wake in the night and reach for you, all I find is a cold pillow."

Silently I congratulate myself. I wanted her to show some backbone and she has. Mother always said I should be careful about what I wished for.

"Lia, I'm sorry, I truly am. It's ... it's not you, believe me. I'm happy to be with you, here in this house. I ... I love you, and what we have. My restlessness comes from somewhere else."

"So you have said," she sniffs, obviously not mollified. "But even though I am not the cause, it is I who suffers for it."

"What do you want of me?" I yell, frustration finally breaking through my restraint. "You're not the only one who's suffering! Do you think I wanted to come here?"

"I ... you said you did. The Mor—"

"The Mor are everywhere! I don't need to be here to fight against them. The north is still overrun! Towns and villages burn while the army cowers here behind this bloody wall!"

"But, your mother. And your sister. You said they always dreamed of coming here."

"*They* did, not me! I am not my sister, Lia, nor am I my mother! I choose what is best for me. I choose!"

"Then why did you come here if you hate it so much? Why not just leave me then!" she screams, bolting from her chair. It scrapes across the wooden floor and slams into the wall in an explosion of plaster dust.

It swirls and eddies in the sunbeam, sparkling like miniature diamonds as she flees the room. A moment later I hear her feet on the stairs, then, from the second floor, the slam of a door.

I sit at the table, watching the sunlight move slowly across the floorboards. My cup no longer steams; the tea is cold and bitter.

My sister, usually so ready to offer her advice, remains silent. I do not know if I am relieved at this or disturbed. Kirin, for all her many faults, was always the better twin when it came to dealing with people, a talent that even her death has not diminished. In the end, I resist asking for her advice. I am afraid of what she will tell me I must do to set matters right.

I stand and walk to the stairs, ascending them two at a time. Lia's door is closed tight. I try the knob, but the door is bolted from within. I rap on the boards, softly.

"Lia? Will you open the door?" When she does not answer, I say, a bit louder, "Lia, please. Open the door. I ... I want to apologize."

Do you? my sister asks, breaking her silence. *Or do you just want the argument to go away?*

I hear Lia's feet, the squeak of the floor boards as she walks to the door. A moment later, the bolt snicks aside. She opens the door, facing me with reddened eyes. Her tousled hair shines like molten copper. "Kirin, I—"

I lean forward and kiss her. Surprised, she tightens, body quivering like a drawn bow. I reach out and twine my fingers in her hair, pulling her to me, hard. She resists, but years of archery have made my arms so very strong. Soon, I feel her startled tension slowly melt. Her mouth opens, her tongue flicking out against mine. I breathe in our mingled breath.

We stumble back, hands tugging at laces and strings, freeing our bodies from enshrouding clothes. My mouth finds Lia's throat, biting gently. Then we are falling, backwards, into the soft sheets. I trail my kisses lower, until my lips find a plump nipple. Lia's gasp of pleasure mingles with my own low growl.

You only think this will help, my sister says in a thick voice. Then she, too, moans in pleasure as Lia's hand runs down my body.

I do not care if this happiness is an illusion; do not care if this is nothing but a distraction. For now, all that matters is this: this shining moment where all I can think about is the feel of her skin against mine and the taste of her in my mouth.

Outside our window, the City rumbles on, a mighty engine of commerce and activity, always in motion. We do not hear it.

* * * *

We make love again after the midday meal, following a long, shared bath. I am rough with her, with my fingers, and my teeth, mingling pain with pleasure until tears stand in Lia's azure eyes. She has taught me much, and I keep her at the edge of bliss for what seems like hours, finally tipping her over into climax. Her breathless cries affect me in turn, and it is short work for her to bring me along with her. We collapse together, Lia's warm back pressed snug against my breasts.

Lia decides to go shopping, so we rise and head out. The day is cold, but brilliant, the sun peering out from behind wisps of lacy cloud. Lia is radiant, her skin almost glowing in the pale, golden light.

The place Lia has chosen is far, near the southern end of the Gold Road, close to the drop-off of the cliffs. "I want pomegranates," she announces as the open-air bazaar comes into sight at the end of the

street. "They are good for the blood, or so mother always said when I was a girl. She loved pomegranates." Lia sighs, a shadow darkening her gaze like a cloud across the sun.

I nod. "I'll walk with you as far as the fletcher's shop."

She nods and twines her arm in mine. Together, we stroll down the uneven byways, between the crude wooden stalls and the outspread blankets.

Even this late in the season and despite the chill snap in the air, the wide square is thronged with people, buying and selling and haggling. Everything in the world is on display, or so it seems.

I see rugs and carpets from every far-flung corner of the Empire, mixed with pots and vessels of ceramic, copper and brass. Women sell beads and bread and bolts of colorful, thin fabric, squatting on outspread blankets. The traditional hawker's cry rings from all around me: "Suk suk soo soo ... Come see my wares. Very fine! Very fine! Come see, come see, come soo. Suk suk soo."

Closer to the bazaar's center, ringing the ancient, dry fountain known as the Sea God's Trident, food stalls send delicious and exotic smells into the air. People sit on the fountain's raised marble side, underneath the statues of mermaids and sea-horses and selkies, eating mutton skewers or fish pastries.

Children dash around and through the stalls, roving gangs of filthy, quick-fingered urchins. As I watch, one of them, a delicate girl of no more than six, stops beside a fat house matron. Her brown eyes go wide as she strokes her dolly's tangled yarn hair. When the matron pauses to smile down at her, one of the girl's accomplices, perhaps her brother, for they share the same dark eyes, draws out a hidden knife and nicks her purse with an economic flick of his thin wrist.

Despite myself, I have to grin at the boy's audacity and skill, even as I open my mouth and shout: "Oi! You there! Get away from that lady's skirts!"

The children vanish, quick as a coin trick, scattering into the crowd in a cloud of mocking laughter. A moment later, the matron's outraged cry goes up, as she misses her stolen purse, but by then we are already past.

We plunge back into the narrow byways. I see the low roof of the fletcher's shop just ahead. Before the war it must have been a small building, little better than a shack. Now fletchers and smiths toil beneath the jury-rigged awnings and scaffolds that have been erected around the building, struggling to fulfill the army's bottomless appetite for fresh ammunition. Bundles of willow branches are piled high, mixed with baskets of goose feathers. Next door, a poultry vendor sells the leftover meat for pennies to a throng of poorly dressed citizens.

Before we reach the arrow shop, we pass an old man standing behind a simple trestle table laden with leather-bound books. Some bear tiny, hand-lettered signs. The man watches the passersby, alert as a ferret, his spectacled eyes moving over the crowd. Lia heads towards him and I follow.

I stand behind her as she scans the hide-wrapped spines. Even though several are in languages other than Imperial, she seems to have no problem reading them. The man bows obsequiously. Even as he does, his eyes never leave his wares. Good for him.

"It is so good to see you again, mistress," he says in clipped tones. Lia smiles, as she always does, at his attempt to parrot the cadence of the upper classes.

"Good to see you as well, master bookseller. I see you have new volumes. Most excellent." The man grins back, enjoying the title and Lia's warm praise.

"I have good news, mistress. Ah ... I have located a copy of the item you requested," he continues, reaching under the table. His hands emerge, holding a paper-wrapped book. Lia beams as her eyes light on it, and her smile grows even wider.

"Sir, you are a miracle worker! Where did you find it?"

"Oh, leave a simple merchant with some secrets, I beg you," he says, affecting modesty. The pride dancing in his eyes belies the gesture.

"Kirin, you had just as well go," Lia says, squeezing my hands. "I am sure listening to me haggle with the master bookseller here would not interest you. Go on and shop, if you like."

"All right," I say. "I'll meet you in half an hour at the bubbly pies stall?"

She nods and leans forward, kissing my cold cheek, then turns back to the old man. They strike up a conversation about one of the books on his table and I wander off towards the arrow shop.

I am almost to the closed front door when a movement catches my eye. A bent form, wrapped in a stained, tattered cloak, crouches at the mouth of an alley, a few doors down from the fletcher's. Something about it, perhaps the tilt of its hunched back, or its shambling gait, compels me to look closer.

The hands and feet are wrapped in lengths of discolored fabric. They are shapeless bundles beneath the thick cloth, irregular useless lumps. The figure's face is invisible in the hood's concealing shadow. It reminds me of the lepers I occasionally see begging in the streets for coins, but smaller, more hunched and compact.

Even as I focus my attention, the figure retreats into the depths of the alley. Its rolling, drop-shouldered gait evokes a memory; a vision of times not long past, where my own skinless, rope-muscle children came forth to do my bidding.

No. It cannot be. In all the world, only I can call forth creatures like the sweetlings. My mistress's own summonings could not make them; her power always left the body intact and whole, if not very swift or nimble. Never before have I heard of, or read about, another such as I.

Despite my certainty, the pull of curiosity is strong, and a moment later I find myself at the alley mouth. I kneel, examining the impression of one wrapped foot in a pile of half-frozen slush. It tells me nothing. I rise, chiding myself for my foolishness, and walk into the alley. My hand finds the hilt of the Ulean steel knife that hangs at my hip.

The shadows between the buildings are thick and impenetrable, like drapes of black fabric, pooling against the ruins of crates and other unknown debris. "Hello? Will you please come out? I just want to talk to you for a moment. Will you speak with me?"

A smell reaches me, riding above the wet, rotten smell of spoiled garbage. The sweet smell of attar, of a charnel house, floats above the reek of spoiled cabbage and human filth. To my wise nose, the smell is terrible and familiar, as nostalgic as a childhood song; repellent as a slap across my cheek.

From the farthest edge of my vision, something moves in the shadows. I hear a gentle hiss, softer than a sigh, the sound pregnant with malice. Without conscious thought, I allow my inner eye to slip open.

The alley seems to grow brighter, even as the shadows dim into a black deeper than the color between stars. I see flickers of light, the skittering glow of countless insects, burrowing and gnawing through the untidy heaps of offal. A rat prowls along one of the walls. It shines like a comet, its modest life glow steady and strong, filled with animal vitality.

I look towards the source of the sound. I see nothing. Nothing. Just a hole in the shadows, blacker than black, darker than the absence of light. The hiss is repeated, louder and closer than before.

I back away, slow and steady, my booted toes questing through the debris. Please, gods, do not let me trip, I ask silently, moving slowly back. The shadow does not follow. It remains where it was, hidden from my mortal and supernatural vision.

In my belly, the blood magic slithers and stirs, uncoiling a languid tendril. It will defend me, I know, even if it must rip the very life from my assailant. I have seen it do so. It revels in such destruction.

I am nearly to the alley mouth when I hear it: the sound of padded footfalls, shuffling through the heaped garbage. The hiss is strong and sharp this time. I sense more than see a squat shadow rushing forward. My eyes catch a glimpse of fluttering cloth, overtop the gleam of something wet and pale.

I turn on my heel and bolt for the tenuous safety of the sunlight beyond the alley. Whatever it is, if it attacks me in the light, at least I will be able to see. Perhaps my screams will even summon help from a guard. If it is mortal, I will make it pay for assaulting me.

I burst out into the welcoming sun, my eyes momentarily dazzled by the glare of light. A figure looms before me, half-seen. I do not have time to stop, and crash headlong into it.

"Get back!" I gasp. The words are part threat, part warning. I grab their coat sleeve and tug them along with me as I retreat.

"Unhand me at once!" the figure barks, pulling against my grip. The voice, soft yet commanding, penetrates my fear. It is familiar to me. I squint into the dazzle, into his face.

It is the eyes that identify him: deep-set and intense, nestled in a web of lines, curiously old for such a young-seeming man. Just like the night I met him at Argus Cho's party, he wears a dark velvet coat trimmed with silver buttons atop a simple shirt of pale linen, devoid of the decorations that many of his station affect.

"I know you," I blurt.

Rath Lan is his name, my sister whispers in my inner ear. *You may recall you labeled him a womanizer and raconteur when you met before.*

"Kirin? Is that you?" Rath asks, no longer pulling against my grip. "Of course it's you; how could I ever forget that compelling gaze?"

"Get away from the alley!" I say, urgently. This time he allows himself to be led away, towards the side of the fletcher's shop.

"Whatever is the matter?" Rath asks. "Did some ruffian try to lure you into the shadows, milady? If so, I'll make him sorry he ever laid eyes upon you."

Rath grabs the hilt of an ornate dueling sword at his hip and half-draws the blade. The thing has the unmistakable patina which only comes from regular, repeated use. Its steel blade is polished, glowing with the mellow light of a hundred conflicts.

We watch the mouth of the alley, but see nothing, no trace of movement.

"Perhaps they thought better of pursuit, milady," Rath says, then louder: "I dearly hope so, for his sake. My blade has drunk deep of many a man's heart blood, so one more is no bother. Just say the word,

milady, and I will cut him most deep, for your honor."

"No, I ... that will not be necessary, good sir. Please stand down, I beg you."

"As you wish," Rath says, sliding his blade back into its scabbard. "But we still should be away from here. Is there someplace I can escort you?" He offers me his arm, a gallant, courtly gesture. Passers-by eye him, and me, their stares curious.

"Thank you," I answer, automatically, taking the proffered arm. "I was just heading to the arrow shop yonder," I say.

"Of course. You are an archer atop the Armitage. Shooting is your business. If you will honor me?"

Together, we stroll the short distance to the shop door. When we get there, Rath pauses.

"Perhaps I might accompany you?" he asks, looking deep into my eyes. "I know of a charming tea shop, just on the far side of the bazaar. They sell the most delightful black tea there, dark as sin and sweeter than a virgin's kiss. If you'll allow me, I could buy you a cup to warm your hands before your trip home..."

I shake my head, remembering his behavior from the night of Argus Cho's party. Just as before, his overt flirtation and the annoyance it evokes wars with a flush of interest from my rebellious body.

"I cannot, I'm afraid. I'm meeting someone. Perhaps another time," I add, for politeness' sake, only realizing after I speak the words that there is a faint grain of truth in them.

"Invite them along, then. I'm sure I can convince them to brew a pot for three. Four, I suppose; my man is with me here.... Somewhere."

"Oh?" I ask. "Is he small, wrapped in a filthy cloak?" The joke sounds strained, even to my own ears. Rath senses it too, and turns to look at me, a queer expression in his eyes.

"No, he is quite tall, I'm sure of it, and the last I saw him he was wearing what he always does: a brown woolen cloak and boots. Are you sure you are all right, my Lady?"

"I'm fine. Just a bit distracted is all. The man in the alley ... he frightened me."

"Of course. Very understandable. Well, I'll be off and leave you to your shopping. If there's anything you ever need, milady, you have but to ask."

Rath bows and brushes my knuckles with his lips. "I shall wait for your call. Until then." He turns and strides off, and my eyes follow him until he is swallowed by the crowd.

I find myself watching the spot where I lost sight of him for a long minute. Finally, I shake my head and turn back to the fletcher's door. The encounter in the alley has left me feeling dissatisfied, that is all. I do not need complications like Rath Lan in my life, now or ever.

I purchase half a dozen new bow strings and a block of fresh wax, along with a spool of waxed thread. The army supplies feathers and more-or-less straight willow shafts, as well as countless iron arrow heads, but I will not trust the quartermaster to supply us with quality strings or the crucial wax which keeps them supple. Lia meets me at the bubbly pie shop, bags of fresh fruit in her hands. We take our pies, steaming in the chill air, to the nearby park along the cliffs, and eat them while we watch the enormous cranes that hang over the side.

"They never stop," Lia says, nibbling at her pie. She has chosen raspberry and treacle, as she always does, just like a little girl. "All day and night they labor, moving everything the City consumes. People, food, animals: all pass this way, sooner or later."

The sight of the cranes reminds me of the near-riot that occurred the last time I was here. Unbidden, I gaze off across the lowlands to the south, just as the poor, trampled girl did. The air is clear, and I feel as if I can see forever. Late afternoon sunlight gleams from the twisting blue snake of the River Mos as it winds its way through the harvested fields below. I see villages, entire towns, far below, made smaller than a child's toy by distance.

I wonder what she was looking for; what she saw when she gazed out across that vista. Saddened, I look away towards the monolithic rows of buildings bordering the bazaar. The sight of them sparks a new memory: that of the shadowed figure in the alley. I think of Rath kissing my hand. Of his young-old eyes and spare, thin body. I shake my head, and return to the moment.

"When all this is over, let's go south," I say. "Leave this place behind, and just ... walk. See the world, without fear of the Mor. Just the two of us."

"I ... would like that," she replies, then, more confidently, "Wherever you go, I will always follow."

"Careful what you promise. I may hold you to that one day."

Lia laughs, and the hesitation I thought I saw just a moment before is gone, so fast I wonder if I really saw it in the first place.

She snuggles closer and I wrap my cloak about her, mingling our body warmth. Together, we sit and gaze off across the vast lands of the south. I resist the urge to turn and look over my shoulder, to see if a small form watches me, even now, from the shadow of a doorway or alley.

No. There can be no sweetlings. I am the only one who can create them. I would know it if there were others.

Together, Lia and I watch the sunset, as day turns to night.

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CHAPTER ELEVEN

"Kirin ... Kirin! Liandra's great juicy tits, woman, are you listening to me?"

I look up from my work, startled by Sergeant Cyr's shout. Bundled sheaves of willow shafts surround me, waiting for fletching. Malthus, the soldier I fought beside on my first day on the wall, sits beside me, tying goose feathers from a basket between us one by one to the newly-made arrows.

As the fight against the Mor has lengthened, the quality of the materials has steadily diminished. Sometimes, the shafts are so badly warped that they cannot be used. Or the arrowheads are improperly greased, and have rusted badly in their cloth wrappers, useless until methodically re-sharpened. Malthus, with his careful eye and deft fingers, is one of the few I trust with the job of crafting missiles that will fly true and bite deep.

"Sorry, sir," I say, laying aside my work. "I was checking our ammunition. We've much to do still."

Cyr growls an obscenity under his breath, then gestures for me to follow him before striding away. I look at Malthus and he shrugs. I stifle the urge to thank him for nothing. I rise, wincing at the stiffness in my legs and fingers.

"Hurry up, gods damn you. I haven't got all day!" Cyr shouts from ahead. I frown as he angles towards the square bulk of the watchtower.

Together we ascend the winding steps to the summit. On the roof, the snow has drifted into gentle mounds against the protective walls. Men bunch around fires glowing in metal braziers, their hands outstretched to capture the warmth. The sky above is featureless and gray, a smooth expanse of glowing nothing, from which the occasional dingy white snowflake drifts down.

The men ignore me for the most part, but one or two look up as I approach, as some always do. This time it is a pair of raw recruits, scrub-faced boys with the first scraggly attempts at beards on their cheeks. One leans towards the other as Cyr leads me towards Captain Garrett, and whispers something. The other nods.

I push down a reflexive stab of annoyance. At least amongst the men of the unit all I have to put up with is hostility; the oafish, brash curiosity displayed by the newcomers is somehow worse, as if I am some sort of freak show curiosity on display.

I approach the captain and salute his back as Cyr does the same. "Thank you, sergeant," Garrett says softly, without looking away from the eyepiece of his spy glass.

He surveys the enemy positions below the wall for several minutes, leaving us to stand in the cold. I wonder how he can stand it up here, in the constant biting wind. It is bad enough down on the battlements, but even in his heavy, purple cloak and padded mail he must be freezing.

Finally, he takes his eye away and looks at us. I try not to frown; the captain looks terrible. His eyes are sunken, surrounded by ovals of bruised, darkened flesh. The lines beside the blade of his nose and across his uncompromising brow are deeper now, like knife wounds. His eyes are as pale and gray as ever, the irises riding on fields of bloodshot white.

When I met him three months ago, those eyes looked out at the world with a steady, world-wise gaze. Now they smolder, chips of burning ice, filled with a terrible intensity. As he turns to us, he scratches at his scarf, pulling it down slightly, and I see the pale mass of shiny scar tissue that mars the flesh beneath

his chin. His hair, iron gray before, is now a shock of ivory white.

"Sergeant, I'd like you to take those two and get them settled," Garrett says, nodding towards the still-whispering youths. "They say they have some experience with the hunting bow. See if they can hit the broad side of a barn, will you?"

Captain Garrett's voice is rough and coarse, delivered barely above a whisper. I do not react; I heard that it was so from the other soldiers' gossip. Given the extent of his injury, I know he is fortunate to be able to speak at all.

"Aye, sir," Cyr says, a rare smile playing across his swarthy face. "If they have any talent a'tall, I'll coax it out of them." His eyes flicker over to me, the back to the commanding officer's. "Is there anything else, sir?"

"No, thank you, that will be all. Leave us."

Cyr snaps a last salute before turning towards the recruits. His bellow is as firm as ever, laced through with the familiar steel I have come to respect, even though I loathe it. "All right, my precious little chicks. The commander says you claim some skill. Let's put that to the test, shall we?"

The pair look at each other nervously, then nod. Together, the three head for the door leading down to the battlements, leaving me alone with the captain.

"Come with me," Garrett croaks, moving towards a second door. I follow him through, into a cozy stone room. A fire crackles in an iron brazier in the center of the space beneath a copper chimney. Tables are pushed against the walls, under the narrow windows. They are covered with untidy piles of paper and parchment, maps and dispatches and inventories. Garrett gestures towards one of the simple stools, indicating I should sit.

"Tea?" he asks. Odd. The captain is not known for inviting soldiers under his command up for a warm cup.

"Please, sir." I reply, dropping to the stool. I sigh. After the cold stone, the fire-warmed wood feels wonderful.

I watch my commander as Garrett busies himself with preparing the tea. I see his hands shake, see the way he almost drops the thick cups, the way their trembling splashes the steaming water across the table when he tries to pour. When I cannot stand it a moment longer, I make to rise, wanting to help him.

"No, please," Garrett says, fixing his smoldering eyes on mine. Even his eyebrows, and his lashes, have turned white. I sense he has had to refuse other help recently, and I can see the way it galls him.

He hands me the cup and I take it, breathing in the fragrant steam. I sip the brew, watching him from beneath my brows as he settles onto a second stool.

"Don't look at me that way; it's rude," he grates. "I'm not dead, or dying, although my physician can't explain why."

"Of course not, sir. I—"

"They say I should have died. Or been crippled. And yet I did not, thanks to you."

He pauses, staring into the depths of his cup, cocking his head as if listening to something. His hands tremble with some subtle palsy. I wait, unsure of what to say. After a time, he continues.

"What did you do to me? On the night I ... I was wounded?" he asks, fixing me with his fevered eyes. Now I have some inkling about how others must feel when they meet my gaze.

"I saved your life," I reply, not boasting, or trying to play games with the question. Too many people saw what I did, even if they do not understand it. Too many stories have been told.

"But, how?" he hisses, leaning towards me. My sister growls a warning in my head, an unnecessary gesture. I can practically feel Garrett's desperation, rolling off of him like a bad smell.

"I only did what I had to do, sir. I can't explain. I wish I could, but I can't."

"Can't, or won't?" he spits, lip curling. "I notice in Sergeant Cyr's reports that you haven't made use of your miraculous talents since that night, even though you've had plenty of opportunities. Sallis, the man killed in the disorder at the cranes when you were on customs duty. Regent and Smythe, killed on the wall in last week's attack. And that's besides the twenty-nine others who were badly wounded, some of whom may still die, despite the best efforts of Shanira's healers. None of them benefited from ... whatever it is you can do."

"I could not help them, sir," I say, guilt twisting in my breast even as the blood magic coils slowly, like a serpent, reacting to the memory of those terrible events.

Of course I saw every single incident; in some cases held the injured or dying as we waited for the priests to reach them. Smythe was just a boy, no more than sixteen. His last thoughts were of his betrothed, a farmer's daughter from the southern lowlands. He pressed her locket into my hand, begging me to tell her that he died a hero as the light in his eyes dimmed, then finally went out. I have it still, in my footlocker, alongside the letter I wrote to her that I find I cannot send.

"But you could help me," Garrett says. "Was it because of my family? Because of what I might do to advance you? Or were you just trying to do something to bring you to the attention of those sycophants at court?"

The words sting; not because they contain even the least shred of truth, but because he would dare utter them to me. I know others feel the same; I am not deaf and my fellow archers are not subtle in their gossip. It kindles my own anger, fanning the ever-present coals into bright flame.

"How dare you," I whisper, not caring that my words are insubordination. "Do you really think I care to curry favor with those fools? They have their nightly revels and assignations while we bleed and die up here, protecting them from the Mor. They haven't the faintest idea of what we must endure for their sakes."

"Then why?" he repeats. "Why me?"

I frown at his tone. He sounds so sad, so lost.

He should be happy you did spare him, my sister says. Does living disgust him all that much?

"I don't know," I tell him. "I ... it all happened so fast. The attack. I didn't know what to expect, not really. Burning stones were flying all around; men were screaming. I looked up, and there you were, out in the open like some damn fool."

Garrett's eyes widen a bit at my words. Good. Let him be angry. Anything but this terrible desperation.

Careful what you say. He is your commanding—

"And then the stone hit, so close, and you were wounded. Blood was everywhere. I just ... reacted. Instinctively. I knew you only had moments to live, so I did something about it. Is living really that terrible?"

The captain glares at me, his icy gaze as sharp as a needle. "Ever since that night," he growls, "I have ... heard things. Not words or voices but ... feelings. Impressions. Snatches of ideas and emotions. They are not my own."

I frown, his words evoking the echo of a memory. It is elusive, and I cannot grasp it. "Not your own? I don't know what you mean? What—?"

"The Mor. The gods-cursed Mor! I can ... I can hear them. When I stand on the wall, I can feel them. I can sense how much they hate us; how much they fear us. It ... that fear, it's driving them. It makes them mad with its power, mad enough to leave their homes and travel here. To assault the wall even though they cannot breach it." As he speaks, he raps his temple with his closed fist, softly at first but then harder and harder, until his skull bounces from the impact. Veins stand out in his neck and forehead, throbbing in time to his racing heart.

Memories flood through me, unlocked by his words. I remember the attack in the mountains, where I first met lieutenant Stathis. Remember opening my inner eye, my secret eye, and seeing the shades of the dead Mor, staring back at me. I remember that I too felt their emotions, washing over me like a burning tide, a flood of anger and hatred and above it all, a terrible fear.

"You have felt it too, I can see it," Garrett says. "What sorcery is this, Kirin? What have you done to me? And to yourself?"

"I ... I cannot speak of it," I stammer. I want to tell him, to unburden myself of the secrets I have not even told Lia, but I cannot. I cannot. I am a murderess, and worse, and Garrett is an upstanding man. He will not understand I did only what I had to.

You paid my blood price, dear sister, when nobody else could have. Or would have. Nobody would have dared go against Marcus. Never forget: what you did was inspired by love.

"And yet I shall pay for it nonetheless, and now someone else is damaged as a result. What is happening to me?"

Garrett flinches back, his eyes flicking left and right. "Who are you—?"

"I am sorry, sir, but I cannot tell you more. I spared your life when you would have certainly died, but I am not proud of what I did. That knowledge has cost me too dearly, more than you can ever know. I swore promises, to myself and to others, I would never use it again. Promises I broke when I saved you. I cannot—I will not—break them again."

Garrett looks at me, as if contemplating ways to force me to speak, then his shoulders slump. He nods.

"Aye, I thought you would say that. I've been watching you, Kirin, these past few weeks. I have always been a good judge of character, and that judgment told me you are not a bad person. Stubborn and headstrong, yes, but bad? If you were, I would have sent you away on that first day.

"But, even though we need your bow, and your keen eye, I cannot let you stay. The men ... they do not trust you. Nor do I, despite what you have done for me. Therefore, you are as of this day discharged from the emperor's service with all due thanks and gratitude." He pulls a piece of paper from atop one of the stacks and hands it to me. I see his signature at the bottom, above a heavy, crimson seal.

"You're dismissing me?" I whisper. A chill runs down my back. Garrett nods.

"Aye, I must. I cannot have you here any longer. The men do little else but talk about you, and every death, every injury, only makes it worse. They fear you, Kirin, and what you can do, even as they desperately hope you will use that power to save them. Cyr tells me you never speak to them. That, save one other soldier, you have no comrades."

I nod, numbly. "His name is Malthus. He is a good man."

"And I will watch over him as best I can. But now it is time for you to go. I cannot have you here, disrupting my men." He points to the discharge certificate. "There were those who called for your summary dismissal, dishonorably, but I found I could not do it."

"Who? Who demanded it?" I say, anger once more flooding across me. Garrett shakes his head.

"I will not tell you, except to say that there are people of power in both the court and the priesthood who have taken an interest in you. The rumors ... there are many."

My sister's panic mingles with my own, stealing away my breath. The room, which seemed cozy when I first entered, now seems constricting, like a cell. We should not have come here, no matter how much my sister, or Lia, wished it. My mistress warned me that it would ever be so; it was my own folly to disregard her wisdom.

"Now get out of here. I have things to attend to," Garrett snaps, turning back to his desk. His hands are shaking worse than ever, trembling so badly that he cannot lift his cup. I rise, stung by the vehemence in his broken voice.

"Captain, I ... may I ask for one favor before I go?"

"What?"

"May I say goodbye to Malthus, sir? He was my shield mate, and I his. I would like to wish him well."

"Just so long as you're out of my sight within the hour. Cyr already knows."

I nod and rise, walking to the door. My hand is on the handle when Garrett says: "Kirin."

I stop and look back. The captain slumps at his desk, seemingly years older than when I met him just three short months ago. He looks up at me, favoring me once again with his burning gaze.

"You should have let me die. Now get out."

* * * *

The icy wind slices through my tunic and woolen cloak as I stand atop the watchtower. Below, the Mor are scattered, a dark, ragged tide, pulled back now, away from the wall. As night approaches they will return, as they do every night, coming back within range of our arrows, but for now they rest, safely out of range.

Troubled thoughts and questions swirl through my mind like a cloud of squabbling, flapping birds. Captain Garrett, as a result of the healing I performed, can now hear the thoughts of the Mor. How can this be possible? What mechanism, what dark device or ability, did I pass on to him when I allowed the blood magic to slip into his body? I healed Lia with that same magic, pushing away the imminent frostbite in her fingers and toes. Did I also infect her?

When you healed him, you had to use the blood magic to keep his mind alive, my sister reminds me. The tendrils were allowed to invade his body much more deeply than you had to with Lia. Perhaps this is why Garrett thinks he can hear the Mor.

"How do you know so much about healing now?" I ask. "You never cared much for learning before. Perhaps I am finally becoming a good influence on you."

I know because you know. We share one mind now, sister, one soul.

"Then why can't I remember the names of the courtly families as you can?" I ask, only half-joking. I have often wondered just how intimate my sister's knowledge of me runs.

Because I am dead. Sharing my thoughts would drive you mad. What I know ... cannot be contained within a mortal mind. You think you understand death because you can see into the spirit plane, but you do not. There are places beyond even that dim realm, places where even the dead fear to go.

She has spoken to me this way before, back when she more often fought with me than conversed. There was a time I would have been thrilled to have her share such secrets with me so openly, but right now all I can think about is Garrett and his newfound ability.

"If you know all that I do, then you know Garrett doesn't just think he can hear the Mor. He actually can. I did, just for a moment, on the day we met Lieutenant Stathis. When I opened my third eye, I saw the spirits of the Mor we killed. It was just as he described."

Yes, she replies unhappily. That is true. Thinking him mad would be much easier to contemplate, wouldn't it? But you have not felt it again since that day.

"No. Perhaps when I let the blood magic inside of him that ability went out of me and into him? I wonder—?"

I face the dark line of the Mor and close my eyes, willing myself to relax. The cold wind buffets me, bringing with it the sharp smell of winter snow and the ever-present stench of burning things.

Tentatively, I reach down, inside of myself, and grasp the hot, slick edge of the blood magic. It uncoils, languidly, like some feral, but wary, animal. I realize it can feel my trepidation.

I push aside my fear as best I can and try to remember a time when I did not loathe that dark wisdom. When I looked at it as the power to avenge wrongdoings. Slowly, like a flower opening, the power unfurls itself in my belly, spreading crimson petals in my viscera. As the power swells, my third eye slides open, revealing the scene below, unfiltered by my mortal sight.

There are hundreds of Mor below, standing in silent ranks at the base of the wall. Ghosts; specters; the souls of the enemies we have killed, lingering here, at the place of their death.

They are looking at me. All of them. Every ghostly face upturned; every pair of malevolent eyes riveted on me. When they see I can see them, a mighty wave of emotion rolls up towards me, silent yet louder than any mere mortal shout, a tide of anger and frustration and rage, shot through everywhere with a desperate terror.

What I felt before was nothing; it was a candle next to the heat of a furnace compared to what assaults me now. It slams into me, real as any physical blow, staggering me. I shrink back, falling to one knee, gagging in revulsion. Alien thoughts and impressions scour my mind like sharp stones. I struggle to understand them, to transform them into words I can understand.

There it is the dark one who calls to the netherdark not knowing must stop it not knowing what it does never happen again it must not no never again no matter that it does not know it is evil must be stopped must be stopped must be stopped we will kill we must kill them all must kill must kill must kill never again stop the netherdark before it can happen again kill kill kill KILL KILLKILLKILLKILL!

Make it stop! Shut your eye! Make it stop! I hear my sister wailing, buffeted like a leaf in a hurricane by the flood of inhuman emotion. I scream, or I think I do, I cannot tell, and focus on my secret eye, willing it to shut. The thoughts invading my mind block me, forcing it to remain open. I see the spirits pressing closer, focusing all their power towards me, as if to kill me with their thoughts.

Must not allow it will not allow it cannot happen cannot happen cannot happen must stop it from happening never again no never again will not allow it must kill it must rip and burn and tear and destroy it all of it every one of them must burn must burn must not allow it will not allow it cannot allow it cannot allow it cannot allow it must kill must kill must kill!

"Kirin, sister, help me!" I scream, trying again to close my third eye. I feel her, trying to assist, moving to block the terrible thoughts flowing into me. She screams as the whirlwind shreds at the very cords of her mind, a terrible sound which reverberates in my head like the tolling of an enormous bell, mingling with the gyre of emotions flowing from the Mor.

I feel the tumult slackening, just a bit, but perhaps enough. I try again to close my third eye, and this time I feel it, ever so slowly closing. I hold on, teeth bared with effort, pulling it slowly down, like a woman trying to close a door against a tornado.

With a final effort I tug, and the eye slams shut, severing the tide sharply, as if cut off with a razor. Blessed silence washes over me. I open my mortal eyes and see two guards standing over me, their eyes wide with fright. I feel something chill on my face and paw at it with a trembling hand. It comes away red. I am bleeding, from nose and eyes, my face covered with blood.

"Fetch a priest!" one of them shouts.

"No!" I croak back, struggling to rise. "No, I'm fine. I..." The guards stare at me, mistrust sitting stark and impossible to ignore on their faces, like a brand.

Echoes of the Mor's mingled voices still float through my head. I cannot tell if they are memories or if the voices are still out there, pressing against my fragile skull.

The cacophony in my head mingles with an external tumult, the sound of men yelling. Horns blow, brassy and defiant, yet oddly desperate. A rumble fills the air, a sound so deep it can only be felt, not heard.

"What...?" I ask, shaking my head, trying to clear it. The wall seems to sway, like a tree in a gale, staggering me.

"The Mor! The Mor! They are attacking! To arms! To arms!" I hear men calling. My blood turns to ice. They cannot be attacking. They never attack in the daylight.

I stagger to the wall's edge and look down. In the distance, I see the enemy, forming swiftly into their crude ranks, swirling like ants. They rush forward even as they assemble, waving their glowing stone weapons and their terrible, rending claws. Down on the wall, men hurry to strap on their armor, to string their bows or put sheaves of arrows into their bags.

Even with my secret eye firmly shut, I can feel the edge of the Mor's loathing and fear, eddying around

me like a foul breeze. Somehow, I can sense they know I am here. The dead have told them.

"Gods, no," I whisper, amongst silence. My sister says nothing. Nothing at all.

"No!" I scream, pushing past the stunned guards and running for the steps.

Below, the Mor crash into the wall like an armored wave.

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CHAPTER TWELVE

"You have blood in your hair," Malthus says in a strangely calm, conversational tone. All around us, men hurry and shout, rushing to form up into ranks.

I reach up and touch my matted hair, then abandon the gesture. It does not matter. All that matters now is that the enemy is at the wall, attacking with a fury I have never seen before. I snatch up my bow from the rack and fit the string into its notches, pulling the bow hard across my leg until it pops into place.

Malthus watches me prepare, his own bow, one of the deep-bellied southern weapons, clutched loosely in his fist. He wears a belt sheathe bristling with arrows and his leather breastplate.

"Put on your helmet," I say, rushing towards the wall's edge.

"What about you?" he asks, following me. I am unarmored, as I always am in the daylight. My leathers are in their usual place in my footlocker down in the barracks. Before today, there was no need to wear them in the daytime.

"No time. Grab those arrow bundles; we're going to need them."

Malthus gathers up the arrow bags and hurries to catch up. The men are already assembled, looking down nervously. Only half are armored; the rest wear their uniforms or, in some cases, their sleeping tunics.

"Get below and put on your armor!" I yell. "You'll do nobody any good shivering yourselves to death!"

They nod and dash away, leaving their weapons resting against the battlements, as if to reserve their place at the slaughtering table the wall will soon become.

"Form lines! Form lines!" I hear Sergeant Cyr bellow. "Stop staring and move, you witless bloody morons, or I'll shove my foot in your gaping holes!" I place an arrow on the string and look down.

The Mor swarm at the bottom of the wall. The base is slightly wider than the summit, but even their claws cannot find purchase on such a steep slope. They beat against the implacable stones, scrambling for purchase.

As I watch, two of the warriors find a seam between the blocks and pull in opposing directions. Impossibly, the stones begin to grind apart as the block is wrenched out of true. I see cracks spread outwards from the gaping hole. Up and down the wall, I see other blocks being wrenched from their moorings, other cracks spreading out and up.

"Oi!" I scream, knowing as I do that the enemy will not hear me but trying nonetheless. I draw the feathers to my cheek and loose in one fluid motion. The arrow streaks down with a thin whistle. My fingers are already fitting a second shaft to the string while the first is still in flight.

The missile strikes one of the warriors atop its armored skull, bouncing aside harmlessly, but it draws its attention. It looks up, its lambent eyes searching for what has dared assault it.

My second shaft speeds down, straight for the narrow eye slit. At the last moment, the Mor flinches back, away from the cruel barb. The arrow shatters on its cheek armor, spinning away in a shower of splinters, but it has done its job. The warrior reels back, its upper arms raised as shields, abandoning the block for the moment.

The men around me cheer and add their own haphazard additions to my attack. "Hold your fire until we're in formation!" Cyr bellows.

"No time! They're ripping the wall apart! We need stones! And mages!" I shout, seeking a fresh target. From above, the Mor are almost completely covered, offering only tantalizing glimpses of the lightly-armored seams.

Cyr hesitates, then turns aside and whispers to a runner. The youth sprints off, calling for the stone wagons to be brought up.

Back beyond the attacking Mor I see a second line forming. Shamans. They share in the warriors' frenzy, stamping their clawed feet in time to their rhythmic piping. I see them forming into a new formation: a broad wedge, pointed straight at the wall beneath me.

The shamans move forward, three dozen strong. I send a shaft towards the creature at the point of the wedge, but it is prepared for such an assault, and the arrow glances harmlessly off of its rock-hard upper arm. Somewhere down the wall, I hear the sound of carts rumbling across the stones.

"Archers ready! Target those bloody shamans!" Cyr bellows at the newly-formed lines. Up and down the wall, men draw arrows and place them on the strings.

"Draw!" A hundred bows are raised. A hundred strings are hauled back to a hundred pale cheeks, and a hundred eyes sight down the shafts. My own arrow's feathers tickle the skin beneath my eye.

I focus on the slender seam between head and armored shoulder: it is a moving target no thicker than the width of my smallest finger. I take a deep breath then half let it out, willing my arm to be steady.

"Give them hell!" Cyr shouts. A moment later the air is filled with the lethal whistle of arrows.

My own shaft is swallowed in the mass, instantly lost from sight, but the Mor I targeted staggers as a dart, perhaps mine, perhaps another's, finds some sensitive place. A second Mor falls, twitching in the dirt, an arrow jutting triumphantly from its face mask.

"Again! Swiftly now!" Cyr calls.

The second volley speeds out and down, staggering more of the enemy. Arrows bristle from their armor but most only serve to slow them. The formation shifts and deforms slightly but holds together.

"Where are my bloody stones?" Cyr yells down the wall. I see a team of engineers a hundred yards away, pulling a cart. It is loaded to the height of a man with rocks and small boulders. Something has stopped it, and the men struggle to hoist the wheels over the obstacle.

The wedge approaches the wall and the attacking Mor warriors part to let it pass. As it does, the warriors pull in close, raising their armored upper limbs over their smaller brethren. The shamans reach forward, placing their claws on the shoulders of the figures before them. Their piping calls increase in tempo, spiraling up to a crescendo. The Mor at the tip brandishes a simple stone rod. Heat braids and twists the air around it.

The shaman presses the tip of the rod to the wall. Sparks fly, and a terrible wave of heat rolls up towards us. I smell the flinty odor of burning rock, feel the tender flesh around my eyes stinging.

The sparks fly upwards in a swirling cloud, burning my face and hands when they settle. The heat banishes the icy wind, and I feel fresh sweat breaking out all over my body. I squint down, through the smoke, and see the stones beneath the lead shaman's rod have begun to glow. Their baleful light grows

swiftly, shifting up from red to orange, then to ruddy yellow.

"Keep firing!" I yell, putting action to words. "We must break their formation!"

More shafts rain down, most bouncing aside harmlessly. Behind me, I hear the cart rumble forward and breathe silent thanks—I do not know to whom—that they have managed to free it.

The wall begins to tremble beneath my booted feet, vibrating like a plucked string. The stones are pregnant with building force; I can feel it in my nerves, and in the quaking of my guts. The stones beneath the shaman's stone rod go from yellow to white.

Through the fiery maelstrom, I see several warriors step forward, just as the wedge steps back. They clutch braces of hammers in their inner, more delicate claws. They flinch away from the terrible heat, raising their upper arms before their delicate eyes. As one, they raise their weapons.

"Brace yourselves!" I scream.

The hammers fall, and the wall explodes.

The Armitage quakes in agony, flinging men like dolls. Archers scream, some pitching headlong over the battlements. I land on my tailbone, hard, the unexpected impact driving the breath from my lungs.

Aftershocks ripple through the stones, and I hear an ominous grinding rumble as the wall shifts beneath me. I see cracks run through the mortar binding the stones, some rising or falling several inches out of true. I scramble to retrieve my fallen bow, then haul myself to my feet. I must see what is happening.

The wound in the face of the wall shocks me: it is a ten-foot wide crater, roughly circular, its edges still glowing red. Sand and gravel pour from the breach like the wall's life blood. Next to it, the shamans sag, exhausted, but quickly shake off their fatigue. They tighten their wedge and step forward again, once more starting their chant. Again, the air ripples around the stone rod as the lead mystic presses it to the tortured face of the Armitage.

"Here! Here! Hurry!" I yell towards the cart team. They see me, and resume their efforts to push the load over. It bounces on the uneven surface, creaking ominously.

"Help them!" Cyr bellows, and several of the archers abandon their useless weapons, putting their shoulders under the wagon. It surges forward, wheels rattling. A moment later it is beside me. Below, the stones have already gone red, and are shifting swiftly towards orange.

"Heave, you useless maggots! Heave!" Cyr screams, adding his own strength to the men's. I wait, arrow on the string, searching for an opening. Few can hit so small a target at such range, but I have made tougher shots.

The cart, designed for such use, hooks over the top of the battlements and begins tilting over the center axle. Men groan as tons of rock are heaved upwards. Gears, similar in design to those I have seen on trebuchets and other siege machines, ratchet, keeping the enormous mass from falling back down.

The men give a final heave, and the engineer pulls the bolt. The front gate swings open, releasing its deadly freight. A rain of stones slides down the timbers with a sound like thunder.

The stones fall directly on the tip of the wedge. Even the Mor are no match for such a thing. Before a rising cloud of dust blocks my vision, I see half a dozen in the front crushed like insects before the stones bounce back, scattering shamans and warriors alike. The strange chanting stutters to a stop.

For a moment there is deafening silence, broken only by the reverberating echoes of the stone slide. Then the men are cheering, slapping each other's backs. The icy wind returns, dispersing the concealing dust cloud.

A mound of stone is piled in front of the breach, partially blocking it. Armored limbs protrude from the mass. Some wave feebly, but most are still. The remaining shamans stagger about, clearly disoriented. Some stare up at us—at me—their inhuman eyes shining with rage.

I shoot without thought, and am rewarded by a piping scream. My latest victim drops backwards, pawing at the arrow that has blinded it. Savage joy surges through my breast. A part of me notices, distantly, that my sister does not match my hunter's call.

The warriors recover swiftly, stepping up to the fresh pile we have made. They begin dismantling it, their powerful limbs tossing aside the stones. Soon they will clear it away, exposing the damaged section to fresh assault. I see the remaining shamans reassembling into a new, smaller wedge. They hesitate, and I realize that they do not have the stone rod; it must be buried beneath the fallen rocks.

"Another cart! Swiftly! Their stone burner is under the pile! We must keep them from it! Archers, shoot!" I shout.

All around me men send down a fresh volley. I glance aside, and see Cyr has joined them, wielding a fallen man's bow. He does not give orders; now he simply shoots. He catches my eye and gives me a wild grin.

We draw and fire, draw and fire, until our quivers are empty. Men call for reloads, and pages scurry forth with fresh bags. We reload and shoot again, expending ammunition with lavish abandon. Only a few of the shafts find a mark, but slowly, slowly, we begin to thin the massed warriors. They falter, hindered by their desire to clear the rubble, contradicted by the very real need to protect themselves from our assault.

Without warning, they break, scattering away from the death zone. The men keep shooting, screaming their defiance at their fleeing backs. The shamans withdraw, still in formation, until they too are out of range. Our fire thins, then stops.

The men raise a cheer, abandoning cover and shaking their upraised weapons defiantly. I see that none are hurt, other than minor scrapes sustained when the wall shook. Below, dozens of Mor lie, most bristling like porcupines at every joint. Broken arrows litter the ground, as thick as fallen pine needles.

I check my bag: only three shafts remain. I look and am appalled to see that every bag is empty. Twists of cord, the wrappers of countless arrow bundles, blow in the breeze. We have repulsed the attack, but only by expending all of our ammunition. If the Mor attack us again—

"Sergeant," I hiss, pointing to the multitude of cords.

"I see it," he replies, his face grim. He pulls aside a page. "Go to the next tower and fetch arrows. As many as you can bring. Have them send a wagonload. And more stones. Quickly now!"

The youth swallows, then pelts off.

"What is your report?" a new voice asks. I turn and see Captain Garrett standing behind our line. His cloak billows in the icy wind, flapping like dark wings. His eyes glitter with feverish intensity.

"They're massing for a fresh assault, I think, but for now we've turned them back," Cyr says.

"Casualties?"

"A few men toppled over the side when the wall shook, but I don't know how many. Three or four. The beasts managed to do some damage before we dropped the stone cart on their heads, but whatever weapon they were using is buried under the pile."

Garrett looks at me. "What is she doing here? I thought I made it plain: she is no longer a member of the Emperor's Army."

Cyr has the good grace to look embarrassed. "Apologies, m'lord, but there was no time. When the Mor attacked, we required every bow. Kirin's eye was as true as ever. She—"

"I don't care how good her aim is, I want her off my wall," Garrett hisses. He flinches, massaging his temple with a trembling hand.

"Aye, sir. Kirin, it's time for you to—"

"They're coming back!" a man shouts, fear making his voice break. The cry is echoed. A fresh surge of panic spreads among the defenders.

I look over the plain and see the Mor reassembling. In the rear, warriors have taken up their stone-throwing harnesses. Shamans chant over fresh missiles, the stones' rising glow visible even in the daytime light.

Their line begins to advance. Several of the men let loose with wild shots, which fall far short of the advancing line. Cyr and Garrett both call for them to hold their fire.

"We need to keep them away from the damaged sections until the geomages can repair the weak spot," Garrett says.

"Where are my bloody reloads?" Cyr bawls.

The advancing Mor begin swinging their enchanted missiles, scattering cinders across the rocky verge. They stop just out of bow range, spinning their harnesses faster and faster.

"Take cover!" I shout, putting action to words and crouching.

The barrage, when it comes, strikes the face of the wall low, just above the impromptu stone cairn. I feel the Armitage shudder anew, in a way that chills my blood. Even after the thunder of their attack fades, I hear ominous crackings and groans from the mighty stones.

I pop up over the crenellations and peer down. The assault has split the wall's face even further, widening the damage caused by the stone burner. The Mor stone throwers step back, making room for the second line to advance into firing range.

"Tell Lieutenant Simmons to light the watchtower bonfire." Garrett says to one of his pages. Cyr gasps. The bonfires are only to be lit in dire emergency. It will, no doubt, panic the citizens behind the wall, but it will also summon the mages who are our last chance at defense.

The second line readies their volley. The empowered stones circle and spark with a deep, malevolent thrumming. Again they let loose, the burning missiles striking low. This time, a section of the wall breaks free in a fresh slide, blocks tumbling out to bounce across the ground like child's toys. Deep cracks zig-zag through the stones, reaching all the way to the wall's summit. Men scream as the flagstones beneath their feet split asunder.

I grind my teeth in impotent rage. The enemy remains tantalizingly out of arrow range. I look out, at the fallen Mor, and realize what I must do.

I open my inner eye, my secret eye, and peer down at the carnage. I see the souls of the fallen Mor staring up hungrily at me. The instant they see me, they send up a fresh cry, audible only to my quaking, cringing soul.

I lock eyes with one of the shades and feel my blood magic responding, lashing in my belly and straining to get out. The ghostly warrior freezes, snared by my power. I bite back nausea at what I am about to do. I swore I would never again do this. Never. But I have no choice.

I send forth all the power of my will, down along the spiritual link between us, commanding the soul to return to its fallen flesh. Amazingly, it resists, trembling with the force of its exertion. I bear down and feel the tendrils of the blood magic slipping out through my mouth and eyes. A moment later I see them, glassy tendrils of eldritch force, flowing across the space which separates us.

They are at once lovely and grotesque, enrapturing and nauseating, moving like living things. The other Mor spirits cringe away from the flowing tentacles. They retreat from them, all save the one I have ensnared.

Just as the tendrils reach the spirit, I repeat my command. It screams as they enter it, the sound like a file rasping across steel. I see the emerald gleam in its eyes fade to black as it jerks like a landed fish, skewered by the glassy tendrils.

It turns, awkwardly, a poorly-controlled marionette dangling from the strings of the blood magic, and stumbles back towards one of the fallen bodies. I see the shade lie down, fusing itself with the dead flesh.

I open my earthly eyes in time to see the body twitch, then jerk. It flops onto its belly, then raises itself on its claws and armored knees. The mighty spine twists as the Mor heaves like a man trying to vomit.

I feel eyes on me and look aside just long enough to see that Captain Garrett is staring at me, his bruised eyes riveted upon my face. A wave of guilt stabs through me, but I push it aside. This is our only hope.

Below, the Mor's carapace splits as a blue-black limb thrusts outwards. I see rope-muscled arms and black, horned claws grasp the edges of the tear, then widen the hole. Something emerges from the fleshy cocoon, blinking its eyes in the feeble sunlight.

The sweetling flexes its mismatched limbs, four arms and two stubby, powerful legs, its terrible body steaming in the chill air. It is smaller than the Mor which was its host yet taller than a man, despite its hunchbacked stance. Dark blue blood coats it, dripping from exposed muscle and tendons. Irregular spines of black horn jut from the sticky mass of its shoulders and back.

Its head is a misshapen lump of gristle and bone swiveling atop its peeled shoulders. Two mad, crimson eyes peer out at the world above a gaping triangular mouth bristling with fangs.

"Gods above and below protect us," Garrett whispers, some trick of the wind bringing his words to my ears as if he stands beside me.

Silently, I whisper to the sweetling, singing a song of blood and pain, urging it to do my will. The creature hesitates for a moment, tasting the air with a foot-long tongue the color of charcoal, then it shambles off, scurrying on its short legs, using its claws to vault forward.

As it moves out, some of the men see it. They cry out in revulsion, sending down an irregular rain of arrows at its back, but none find the mark. As it enters the clear space between the wall and the enemy

lines, I see the Mor warriors stop, frozen by the sight of it. The sweetling accelerates, crossing the intervening distance with frightening speed.

Then it is among them, crashing into their line. I see its horned limbs flailing, cutting through armored hide with ease. Blue-black blood flies, steaming, into the winter air.

The Mor recoil from the terrifying apparition, seeming to forget about their terrible stone weapons. The sweetling ignores them, saving its efforts for those standing between it and its true goal. A moment later it breaks through the front line, scattering warriors in its wake.

The first shaman, still intent on its efforts to empower the stone-throwers' missiles, does not even look up as the sweetling takes it from behind. Its mighty claws close on the shaman's outstretched lower hands. The mystic has time for one piping scream before the sweetling snips them off, as effortlessly as shears slicing through a rose stem. Dark blood jets from the amputated stumps.

My minion scurries forward, embracing the shaman like a lover, wrapping its thorny limbs around it. It squeezes, and I see the cruel barbs piercing the shaman's thick armor. The powerful spine flexes backwards, further and further. The shaman has time for one last shriek before its flesh succumbs to the terrible pressure with an echoing crack.

The sweetling drops the lifeless mystic to the ground, then turns, seeking fresh prey. All around, shamans and warriors alike are becoming aware of the threat in their midst. My minion scampers towards a second victim, its claws clacking together eagerly.

The Mor give voice to their unearthly piping war cry and turn to face the threat. Stone hammers and knives glow sullen red, smoking in the cold air. Shamans abandon their tasks and retreat behind their larger, better-armed brethren.

The sweetling rushes forward, ignoring the warriors. From the wall, I whisper to it, goading it to continue the slaughter. A portion of its bloodlust reaches me, traveling back along the connection between us. It tingles in my hands and cheeks, awakening echoes in my breasts and between my thighs. I bite my lip in mingled loathing and desire.

The Mor encircle the sweetling, ringing it with burning stone knives and implacable claws. Warriors use their powerful forearms like shields, blocking the worst of its murderous attacks while others slice and cut at it from behind. Even my creature's fury is no match for them. Soon, it stumbles, falling to one knee.

The Mor are on it in an instant, abandoning their weapons in favor of their powerful claws and stamping, hoof-like feet. I lose sight of it in the press, as it is swallowed up by a forest of waving limbs and thrashing bodies. When they retreat, all that is left is a gory streak, painting the sands black.

A new sound reaches me: hurrying feet. I look down the wall, and see a phalanx of men and women hurrying along the battlements. Their robes flap in the wind.

The mages have come.

Strong fingers grip my shoulders, turning me away from the crenellations. Captain Garrett's hands tremble. "Kirin ... gods woman, what you did," he says thickly, like a man just woken from a nightmare-plagued sleep.

"What I did saved the wall. For now. The rest is up to you. And them," I gesture to the mages.

Garrett shakes his head, like a horse troubled by flies. "Damn, damn, *damn* these voices. I hear them. I hear them, and they will not stop. I hear them whispering to me. They—"

He raises his eyes to mine. "They hate you," he breathes. "They fear all of us, but you ... you they loathe. All of this," he waves his hand, encompassing the death and smoke all around, "all of this is because of you."

"That's nonsense," I say, even as his words stab a blade of ice into my heart. "The Mor attacked the Armitage while I was in the north. They came here and I followed them, not the other way round."

"Be that as it may, I know it. Somehow, you are the cause of all of this."

"Whatever happened to you has driven you mad," I whisper, looking to see if anyone has heard. "I cannot be the cause of all this!" Sweat breaks out all over me, as my body reacts to the truth my mind cannot—will not—accept.

Garrett stares at me, his face closed. He has made his judgment. He points to the stairs leading down into the vast halls inside the Armitage, and from there out, down into the sprawling City.

"You saved my life once, and now I repay that debt. Go. Now. Before I toss you over the side like I should and let the Mor take you."

I hold his fevered, haunted eyes with mine for a moment, then drop my gaze. For an instant, the temptation to fling myself over the battlements nearly overwhelms me. I feel my feet turning, pointing me towards the suicidal edge. The end would be swift: if the fall did not end me, the Mor certainly would, probably before I could feel much pain. Deep inside, the blood magic boils in my belly, churning its way into my throat, preparing to rip the life from as many of the enemy as it can before my life is extinguished.

Then I remember Lia, waiting for me in the city below. If I die here, she will never know why. Nor will I. I turn away from the edge, and from Garrett, and walk towards the steps.

I pass Malthus on the way. He grabs my arm. "Kirin! Where are you going? We need you!" he cries.

"I ... I have been dismissed. It's up to you now." The words catch in my throat like barbs. I feel tears, of rage and shame and fear, welling in my eyes.

Malthus stares at me as if he cannot comprehend what I am saying, then nods, his face numb. He turns away from me, back to the wall and the enemy beyond.

I descend into shadow as, behind me, the attack begins anew.

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CHAPTER THIRTEEN

Lia arrives home several hours after dark. I hear the door open and lift my head from the table, then move to rise. My arm knocks over one of the empty bottles in front of me. It rolls aside and falls to the floor, bouncing off the rug with a muffled thump.

"Kirin? Is that you?" she calls, ascending the stairs. "I thought you would be at the wall until tomorrow, so I—"

She walks into the dining room and stops, her pretty eyes going wide. My cup, my leather and wood traveling mug, not one of Lia's crystal goblets, sits beside a pair of wine bottles, one empty, the other half-full. A third, empty as well, rests on the rug under the table. The only light comes from a single, half-burnt candle; by the time darkness fell, I no longer cared about lighting the lamps.

Seeing her expression, a surge of guilt washes over me, something I hoped I would be too drunk to feel. "M'sorry, Lia. I'll clean this up. I had a bit of time to myself today, you see, and it seemed like a nice drink or three was in order." I bend to retrieve the fallen bottle, then find myself, unexpectedly, sitting on the floor. For some reason this strikes me as hilarious, and I begin to laugh.

"Kirin, what happened? Why are you—"

"Have a drink with me. It's good wine; I spent almost all of my pay on it. We're celebrating." I haul myself to my feet, swaying as the room seems to tilt beneath me.

Lia pulls out a chair and watches as I walk to the cabinet. I fumble with the latch and somehow manage to get one of her delicate goblets to the table without dropping it. I splash wine across the polished wood; only half ends up in the cup where it belongs.

"What are we celebrating?" Lia asks.

"My honorable discharge from Imperial service," I say, forming the complex words carefully while pouring more wine into my mug.

"I do not understand. The siege—"

"Oh, the Mor're still out there, make no mistake. S'just that the army no longer wants me to be on the wall with proper soldiers is all."

I raise my cup. "To the emperor, gods save his sorry hide. And ours," I toast, before swallowing deeply. Lia nods and takes a sip, then lowers her glass to the table.

"Kirin, this is not right. With the Mor still at the gates, the defense needs you more now than ever. My father has told me at length of his challenges in allocating mages. Why, I heard there was a daylight raid just this morning. I—"

"Well, they've sent me away, so I guess the need isn't as dire as Daddy would have you believe, eh?"

Lia stares into her cup, her brow furrowed. She cocks her head, her eyes puzzled. "Does this have something to do with what happened with Lord Garrett?" she asks.

"You could say that," I reply, fumbling with the bottle. The last of the wine splashes into my cup. Lia's face grows stern.

"But ... that is unfair. You saved his life. They should be advancing you, not sending you away. I can talk to the regimental commandant on your behalf. Appeal Captain Garrett's decision to—"

"No," I say, holding up a hand to stop her.

"I know you dislike it when I use my family's influence on your behalf, Kirin, but this is different. They weaken our defense if they send away our best and brightest."

"Best and brightest," I repeat, snorting laughter. It really is almost too much. "Lia I ... just don't interfere. Please? Garrett has his reasons for what he did."

Her frown deepens. "Reasons? What could justify that? Kirin, please, I can fix this. If you are not getting along with the men in your unit, I can have you reassigned to a different—"

"No!" I shout, splashing the dregs across my hand with the vehemence of my reaction. "There is nothing you can do! Please, just ... do nothing. The captain's decision is the right one."

Lia reaches out and takes the mug from my hand, then places it on the table. She takes my hand, fingers twining through mine.

"Kirin, please. I can tell there is something you are not telling me. If I knew what troubles you, I could—"

"You mustn't because..." I choke. "Because I think that the Mor may be attacking because of me!"

The words pass my throat like chunks of broken glass, leaving it lacerated and raw. Guilt wells up inside of me like blood. Lia stares at me for a moment, her face a shocked blank; then, astonishingly, she laughs.

"I don't see what's so fucking funny," I growl.

Lia shakes her head. "I am sorry, Kirin, I really am. But, honestly, you? Why would the Mor travel all this way, burn so many settlements and march so far from their homes, just to come to you? It makes no sense!"

"Because..." I hesitate. The image of the Mor sweetling, rising from its own dead flesh, flashes across my memory. I remember with crystal clarity the sensation of fear and loathing that reached me, like a physical sensation, when I looked upon the spirits of the Mor in the shade world. Recall the sensation of desire, mixed with bone-deep revulsion, as the sweetling killed, and killed and killed.

I press on, sick to my stomach from too much wine and swallowed guilt. The drunken fog surrounding me recedes. "Because I have seen the spirits of the fallen Mor, Lia. On the mountain, then later on the wall. I have felt their thoughts. They fear all of humanity, but that's nothing compared to what they feel about me. They ... Lia, they loathe me. More than anything. When they saw me, I could sense how terrified they were."

"Of what?" she asks.

I drop my head in shame. Oh, gods, how could I?

"I ... I did something I shouldn't have. On the wall. I ... It was during the Mor attack this morning. We weren't expecting it. They made it all the way to the wall, and were breaking down the stones. We pushed them back, but only by expending all of our arrows. When they came back, we were defenseless. Defenseless. Someone had to act."

"Kirin, what did you do?" Lia asks, pulling away from me. The small motion, coupled with the look of mistrust in her eyes, strikes me more forcefully than a slap. All of my carefully rehearsed justifications dry up in my throat, leaving me speechless.

"Oh, Kirin," she breathes. "You couldn't. After everything that happened in the North. After your son ... Oh, gods, no."

"I had to," I say, trying to meet her eyes. How can I explain? How can I prove to her that without my sweetling's help, the wall would now be breached? "Lia, you must understand, they were going to come through if I didn't do something. They had a weapon that—"

"I understand you did what you felt was necessary," she says, surprising me into silence. She raises her eyes to mine. "But that does not make it right, and you know it."

Anger surges in my breast at her righteous tone. "Don't you think I know that? I'm not trying to justify myself to you, or anyone else. I know better than anyone the price such wisdom carries."

"Do you? Do you really?" she responds.

"Yes! I didn't want to—"

"Do not lie to me! Of course you wanted to!"

The accusation shocks me into silence. Anger is smothered by a sensation of sickening guilt. Unbidden, the memory of my dead son's specter comes to me, the tiny form clamoring, demanding, that I allow it to be reborn in its fallen flesh. I try to imagine what it would have been like to give in to that terrible desire, to grant his one and only wish. But I know what the result would have been.

A monster. A skinless, hunchbacked thing. Teeth and claws, sprouting from my son's infant flesh. A wave of nausea ripples through me.

"M'going to be sick," I mutter, then stagger for the kitchen. The room seems to tilt and sway, like a ship on rolling seas, and I crash into a chair on the way there. I adjust, headed through the kitchen for the rear door. I paw at the bolt, cursing it until it finally relents.

Outside, the night is bitter cold. The air freezes the tears which lie, unfelt before now, on my cheeks. I stumble down the steps and onto the gravel path, walking to the dry fountain at the yard's center.

I hear Lia's footsteps crunching along behind me. She pauses, an arm's length away, while I lower myself to the fountain's rim. Slowly, the clear air dispels the sick fog which fills my head and belly.

"I'm all right now," I say, trying to sound convincing. I scrub at the ice tickling my cheeks with a shaking hand.

"Kirin I..." Lia begins, then stops. She gestures with her hands, as if she is trying to pluck the words she wants to say from the air, then a moment later shrugs and lets them drop.

"Maybe the priests were right," I mumble. "Perhaps it is as Brother Ato said, and I am an abomination."

Lia shakes her head. "No, Kirin. Not you. You are kind and strong, and just. If you were evil, I would not love you. You are, in many ways, the best person I know."

"But?" I ask, hearing the equivocation in her tone.

"But you have something inside of you. Something that, no matter how hard you try to use it for good,

will not be tamed. Or redirected, at least not for long."

I nod. She is right.

"What can I do?"

"For now, nothing. Rest. Things will seem better tomorrow and we can plan our next move."

I nod, resisting the urge to tell her that such feeble-minded and easy solutions are beneath us both, forcing myself to trust her simple logic. She helps me to my feet, then leads me into the house. Arm in arm, we ascend the stairs. In my room, she lowers me into my narrow bed and helps me with my boots, then pulls the woolen blanket over me.

Before sleep claims me, I hear her draw the bolt on her own bedroom door, barricading herself inside. Despite myself, I cannot find the indignant anger I should feel. All I can feel is relief.

* * * *

I wake late in the morning, roused by the tick of sleet against the window. I heave myself to my feet, groaning as my body protests. My head throbs in time to my heartbeat and my mouth feels coated with sewage.

I remember every moment of last night.

Lia's bed is unmade, the sheets tangled, as if she had spent the night wrestling with nightmares. I walk the house, aimlessly looking into rooms and opening doors. She is not here.

I walk into the kitchen and there, on the table, is a note, next to the remains of her hurried breakfast. My name is at the top, in her elegant, educated hand.

Much to do with the children today, it says. Had to leave early. We shall talk more tonight, if you desire. Try to enjoy your holiday.

I put water on the stove to boil, then stare at my steaming cup of tea until it grows cold. The note rests on the table. I resist the urge to rip it up.

Lia is always neat in her habits, so cleaning the house takes only a few minutes. The breakfast dishes are washed and set in the rack to dry; the empty wine bottles carried down to the cellar and put in a wooden box. I will return them later, if I have time.

I laugh at the phrase. If there is time? There is nothing but.

I change into a pretty, embroidered dress, a gift from Lia, never worn. The deep blue wool will be warm, and the color compliments my fair skin and silver-blond hair. My sturdy boots go underneath the long skirt.

I slide my good steel knife into my boot, and hang the stone Mor knife I recovered from outside the wall on my hip. Let people glare if they wish, either at the sight of an enemy relic or at an armed woman; I care not.

I wrap myself in a burgundy cloak trimmed with gold embroidery, then lock the front door behind me. Delicious smells reach me as my footsteps approach the main thoroughfare, reminding me I have not eaten since the morning of the day before. I walk into one of the eateries and order food, then stare out the window at the freezing rain until my meal arrives.

It is mid-day, and soon the place is full of people, a mix of merchants and minor court functionaries. The courtiers all whisper together, heads bent, plotting minor intrigues over cups of blood-red wine.

"See them, sister?" I whisper. "Do you wonder what scandals are brewing? What gossip is being exchanged? What intrigues must they be privy to, I wonder?"

There is no reply.

"Come now, surely you can't be mad at me forever. Pouting does not become you. Why not rail and shout at me about whatever I did and be done with it?"

Still there is nothing. Fingers of ice seem to close, slowly, around my laboring heart. My chest feels constricted; I cannot draw a proper breath.

I think back to yesterday—was it just a day ago?—trying to remember exactly what transpired atop the Armitage. I recall the terrible storm of the Mor ghosts' thoughts, a whirlwind of rage and pain and fear, buffeting my mind until my very thoughts began to dissipate, like smoke. Recall the way I struggled to close my secret eye, to cut off the flood, struggling helplessly against it.

Then I remember the brief respite, as if someone, or something, was helping me. Not much, just enough for me to force my third eye closed. After that, all has been silence.

"Sister, please, stop this now. You're scaring me. I know you disapprove of what I did, but this is cruel. If you love me ... tell me you're all right. Rage at me if you want, I've earned it, but stop tormenting me with this silence."

I sit and wait, staring at my cold soup and out at the drizzling rain, until all of the chatting, glittering courtiers have gone. The proprietor comes out from behind his counter and asks me for the fifth time if I am done eating. This time, he adds that he will be closing for the afternoon, so sorry, and that I must go. I scatter coins across the table and walk out into the wet chill.

My feet lead me away, into the maze of streets. They are no longer crowded. The wind and the freezing rain have defeated all but the most determined and well-cloaked. I knot my hands against my belly and curse myself for forgetting my gloves.

My wandering steps take me south, towards the drop of the Northwatch Cliffs, but I know that is not my true destination. Yesterday's events atop the wall have shown me I can no longer afford the luxury of ignorance. I am certain now that there is something about me which compels the Mor; that drives them to near-madness with the desire to stamp it out.

My mistress told me that those with power over death must always be cautious, and live a life of solitude, avoiding the prejudice and fear such knowledge breeds. Necromancers seldom meet and never gather.

I recall the hunched creature I saw in the alley near the bazaar. I must know. If it was the product of necromancy, then I must learn who its master is.

I retrace my steps to the bazaar. It is nearly empty; the icy rain has ceased, but not before sending all but the bravest, or most desperate, merchants back to the warmth of their hearths. I spend a fruitless hour roaming its perimeter, searching for some sign of the figure, but turn up nothing.

The golden threads adorning my cloak soon draw the attention of a group of shifty-eyed youths. They follow me, hanging back at a discreet distance. I keep an eye on them as I move around the square, lest they think to come up behind me unaware.

An idea occurs to me, and I stop. I look back at the youths, then turn and walk towards them. They look at one another as I approach, clearly unused to their prey walking straight into their clutches.

"Which one of you leads?" I ask. I open my eyes wide, treating them to a long, unbroken view of my disturbing gaze. My hand rests on the hilt of the Mor knife. They stare at me, their mouths open, then look at a large lad in the rear.

He is tall, well over six feet, with a blacksmith's muscled shoulders. He cannot be more than sixteen, the same age at which I married, but already an ample gut strains atop his wide belt. A long knife hangs there, prominently displayed. I glance at it with an amused smile, as inside the blood magic readies itself for violence.

The tall youth pushes forwards, his eyes hard above his grinning mouth. I can tell my black eyes make him uneasy, but, just like other men I have known, he covers it with a display of bravado.

"That'd be me, woman. Wha'choo wan'? Pr'haps a bit o' rough trade, eh? Ol' hubby not greasing you reg'lar and you hunger for a bit o' excitement?"

"No. What I hunger for is information. This side of the square is your territory, yes?"

"Aye. This whole stretch b'longs to me an' my crew. An' you're walking on our ter'tory. You be payin' us for our protection. You looks like you cn' afford it."

His eyes roam up and down my body, slow, the gesture meant to intimidate. Behind him, the others, emboldened by his display, snicker and shift, fanning out.

I smile back. "Good. Then it's your business to see who comes and goes. Hopefully you noticed someone I'm looking for. I saw them a few days ago, over there in that alley. A small person, deformed and wrapped in rags and tatters. Do you know who I'm talking about?"

The boys look at one another, even before I am through speaking. One mutters a curse, only to fall silent as the leader glares at him. Oh yes, they know very well who I am talking about.

"What iff'n we do? What's it worth t'you?" the big youth says, glaring.

"What is your name?" I ask in reply. He blinks at me, startled by the question or my by calm tone, I know not which.

"Rolf," he mutters.

"Rolf, listen to me. I think that you know who I'm speaking of, and that you have reason to wish them ill. Am I right?"

Rolf looks at the other members of his gang, then drops his eyes. Suddenly he looks his age, young and scared. I stand, silent. I know that for people like him, the line between fear and violence is very thin, indeed, and I do not want to hurt them.

"People've been goin' missin'," he finally says. "Tweeter there los' his sissy a month back. She jus' up and dis'peared from her room in the night. Nobody seen her since. Lotsa folk aroun' here say they be seein' other strange things. The beggars and street people be too afraid to stay; they move to other parts of the city few months back. They tellin' stories."

"Stories?" I prompt, softly.

"Ya. Stories abou' people in rags, limp'in' about and takin' people away. Say they got no skin, they does, and that they comes at ya quiet-like, when you be sleepin'. I hear tell they got knives for fingers and skulls for faces, and only comes out at night."

Knives for fingers, I think to myself. Yes, that could be them. But the one I saw, I saw in the daytime. Even though it stuck to the shadows.

"Rolf, do you know where they go? Where they take people?"

He looks up at me, his frightened eyes going hard with anger. "Iff'n I knew that, d'you think I'd be standin' here? I'd be goin' to take a piece o' them for Tweeter's sissy. We all would."

I look at him, my head cocked, considering his words. I believe him; he does not know. One of his men, a thin, pock-faced boy of no more than twelve, drops his gaze and tries to hide himself behind the boy in front of him.

"What about the rest of you?" I call out. "What about you, there, in the back?"

The boy looks up, startled, and meets my black gaze. I see him sketch the sign of Loran Lightbringer in my direction, the movement furtive, as if he fears me seeing it. I bear down, forcing him to meet my gaze.

"I maybe sees sumthin'," he finally mutters, when it is clear I will not look away. Rolf's eyes go wide.

"Come here, boy," I say, threading a tiny bit of the power of command into my words. "The rest of you, stay here." The boy lurches forward, as if he dreads getting close to me.

"Why should we let you talk to 'im?" Rolf says, stepping close to me and pushing his face into mine. His breath is sour and smells of onions and the wet stench of lupas root. His teeth are very bad, brown stumps set in reddened gums. I meet his truculent stare calmly. Magic tinges my words with the metallic tang of blood.

"You'll allow it because I wish it. And, trust me, you don't want to come between me and my prey, do you?"

The red magic threads its way into Rolf's body, and I pull, gently, just hard enough for him to feel the first precursors of pain. His eyes go round as dinner plates, the pupils dilating in fear, until they are mere pinpricks. He too, sketches a sloppy sigil of the Lightbringer's towards me.

"Please, mistress. I din' mean nuthin' by it. Lemme go, I beg you," he breathes. Behind him his men take a step back, their expressions awed.

"Go," I command them, and they fall back. "Not you," I add to the pock-faced boy. He stops like a hooked fish, clearly wanting to be away but held by the power in my voice. I step close to him as the others scramble away, disappearing into the nearest alley

"Tell me what you know and you can go, I promise," I whisper, stroking his shoulder like I would a skittish horse.

"Please, milady, I don' be knowin' nothing," he begs.

"I think you do. Tell me. Tell me."

The boy's will proves no match for my magic, although in the end I am forced to hurt him more than I would like. He fears them so much, and with good reason, but I have to know. I leave him on a

trash-littered stoop, bleeding from the nose and the mouth, but essentially unharmed. He will be fine in a day or two, ready to work more mischief on the weak at Rolf's command.

I follow his directions, his words still fresh in my mind. *It was a house, old place with a wall an' a gate. There was statues, with wings-like, set up high on the walls, above the gate. There was more on the roof. I saw things there, shapes like Rolf said. Their eyes, they was white, and sparkly, like them gems with the rainbows trapped inside. Loran protect me, when they look up at me, I was so scared...*

White with rainbows trapped inside. Eyes like opals. When my dark children returned from the grave, their eyes were like that, shining and white, and altogether inhuman.

I begin searching, following the boy's sketchy directions. The rain stops shortly after I begin, sparing me from a further soaking. It is close to night when I finally find it.

The neighborhood was grand, once, its streets lined with the ruins of large houses. Many have high, peaked roofs and old-fashioned facades. Several are surrounded by high walls topped with iron spikes, but only a few are still in good repair; the rest show signs of neglect bordering on outright dilapidation. Several of the roofs have been cannibalized for their tiles, and the exposed trusses jut into the freezing rain like ribs. Unlocked gates hang open or creak in the gusting wind.

The gate I find is guarded by a pair of statues, a brace of winged lions set on stone columns atop the wall. The lions are eroded and chipped, their once-fine carvings softened by countless years of wind and rain.

At least the house still has its roof, and its window glass, I think to myself. Someone must still live here.

More winged shapes squat near the roof: stone raptors, carved with wings outspread. Many are broken, their stone feathers sheared away and their carvings softened by untold years of weather. No other house is so adorned. This must be the place.

I stop at the locked gate, peering through the bars. I see tracks running through the withered gardens. The freezing rain atop a dusting of old snow has softened their outlines, but the wrongness of them is clear to my learned eye. They are misshapen, ill-matched things, no pair the same as another. Whatever made them was not feet or claws or hooves or paws, but an inhuman blending of all.

I should return later, in the daylight, but my curiosity overwhelms my better judgment. I will take only a moment to look around. The darkness will help cover my movements, should someone be looking out of one of the curtained windows.

I slip through the gate and move to the closed front door. I peer at the weathered bronze crest set into the stones beside it, moving aside the brittle ivy so I can see it better. The crest shows three ships set above a field of waving lines; a merchant family, perhaps, fallen on hard times.

I walk around the side of the house. My boots crunch against pebbles of frozen sleet; the sound echoes off the manor walls. I feel an unpleasant sensation, like eye-tracks on my skin, but in the darkness I can see nobody watching me.

Around back is a cobble-stoned yard. A coach house stands near the back gate. Candlelight gleams from inside, the dim orange light barely penetrating the dingy windows. The rear gate is closed tight, secured with a stout timber bar. The manor's rear windows are protected by rusted iron grates.

I move forward, towards one of the windows. Just before I can see inside, my booted foot crunches

down on a shard of broken bottle glass. The sharp crack fills the courtyard.

"Who's there?" a man's voice says, deep and slow. He steps from the interior and holds his candle aloft. He sees me, standing beside the door. There is a cudgel in his hands, a stout length of wood studded with nail heads. "This is private property," he growls.

He is middling tall and thick-set, with broad shoulders and a deep chest. His earth-colored coat is stained and tattered, worn atop a dingy white shirt. A drooping moustache partially conceals his hard, uncompromising mouth. Brown eyes glitter beneath unkempt brows of bushy gray.

"I've come about the creatures," I say. Even as the words leave my lips I realize how mad they would sound to any rational person.

"I don't know what the hell you're talking about," the man replies, his tone flat and cold. For an instant, I think I see a reaction in his eyes, perhaps guilt, perhaps simple wariness.

"Please. I need to know more about their master. Is that you? Do you have the power to call them back?" I would feel foolish saying such things, like a madwomen, except for his reaction, a guilty lowering of his eyes. He knows. Gods, he knows.

"You should go. Now. You don't belong here." He takes a step towards me, hefting his weapon. I draw the Mor knife from my belt, and feel my body responding, my weight coming up on my toes. Inside, I feel the stirring of my red magic, like a hunting dog sensing its master's excitement, straining against the leash of my self-control.

"I'm sorry, but I can't do that."

"I can't help you," he says, a new note creeping into his tone. Fear. "You have to leave. Now."

"You're lying. You know something, and I won't go until you talk with me."

A hissing whisper comes from behind me. I turn to face it. There, in the shadow of a skeletal tree, something crouches. Just moments before, it was as still as only a dead thing can be, but now it moves with awful purpose. I see the play of rawboned muscle and jagged bone as it shifts, icy wetness glittering in the wan candlelight.

More sounds, delicate as whispers, come from all around me, and from the black depths of the carriage house. More shapes move in the tangled, concealing grass. Two. Three. More.

"You should have left while you could," the man says, shaking his head. His hard eyes soften with regret.

From the shadows behind him something steps into the light, a compact shape, terrible yet familiar. It is smaller than a man, only four feet at its tallest point, with hunched shoulders and long, ape-like arms. Its legs and feet are twisted at unnatural angles, the feet more resembling the taloned claws of a bird than anything else. Gray-red muscle and pale tendon slide under a patchwork covering of leathery skin. Beneath it, I see the yellow-ivory gleam of bone.

Worst of all is the face, a slack, dead-eyed thing with splayed teeth set into black gums and wide, opaline eyes ringed with hemorrhaged flesh. A row of horns circles its brow, a barbaric crown.

I cannot breathe. It is a sweetling, there is no question of it.

"Please," I begin, then break off as the rest of the pack emerges from their hiding places. Unmelted snow sparkles on horns and claws, and rending teeth. "Please, you must listen to me. There are things

happening, on the wall. The Mor ... I think they've come because of this. Because of us, and what we can do."

The man frowns, cocking his head at me. "What do you know about this?" he asks, gesturing to the closing ring of malice that surrounds me.

"I came because I can call them too," I hurry to reply. I know all too well the creatures' terrible speed, so unexpected from such ruined-looking things. If they charge, I will stand no chance against them. "I don't know how, or why, but anything or anyone I bring back from the dark lands is ... like they are."

"You lie," the man replies, shock registering on his face. "That's impossible."

"No, it isn't. I wish it were, but it's not. Please, call them off, and let's talk. I swear to you that what I have to say is nothing but the truth."

The sweetlings draw close, half a dozen strong. The cold has killed the worst of the stench their decaying tissues exude, but at such close range I can still get a whiff of them. The sickly-sweet smell, the perfume from an open grave, is strangely comforting. Once, I associated such a smell with security, even love. But that was before. Before my infant son paid the ultimate price for my pride.

The largest sweetling, the one from the carriage house, raises a thorned limb. Three jagged claws sprout from the ruin of its hand, wicked, barbed things of fetid bone. I can see its desiccated muscles bunching, drawing tight as it prepares to spring.

"Hold," a new voice says. The sweetlings instantly obey, freezing like statues. In the confusion of the moment, I did not hear the manor house door open. A second man stands there, at the head of the back steps, looking down on the courtyard. He is tall, and thin, his pale skin contrasting with the dark velvet of his coat. He does not seem old, but his eyes do; they are wide and dark, surrounded by a web of deeply-etched lines. I recognize him.

"Rath," I say, too stunned to say more. Somehow his presence feels as inevitable as it is shocking, as if some inner part of me were expecting him here.

"It is good to see you again, milady Kirin," he acknowledges with a nod. "Although if I'd known you were coming I would have shown you better hospitality."

He nods to the man from the carriage house. "Allow me to introduce my servant, Eddard. I see you've already met the lads. Boys, be nice now, and don't crowd our guest."

The sweetlings shamle back. Their milky, dead eyes never leave me. Hunger radiates from them in waves.

"Come. It's not safe out here. You may have been followed." He moves aside, gesturing for me to step through the open door. I hesitate.

"Oh, please," he scoffs. "We both know if I meant to do you harm, you'd be lying on those stones, watching the lads rip out your entrails. Please come inside, where it's warm, yes?"

He is right: I can't resist, or even flee. If he orders the sweetlings to attack, my death will come swiftly. I may wound or kill Rath or Eddard with my blood magic as they drag me down, if I am lucky, but the end result will be the same.

And I must know.

Without another word, I sheathe my useless knife and ascend the stairs. The door closes softly behind me.

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CHAPTER FOURTEEN

"Please, won't you take your ease? May I offer you some refreshment?" Rath takes my arm, as if this is nothing more than a social engagement, then leads me deeper into the house. The sweetlings remain outside. In their absence, I feel a measure of confidence returning.

It is dim inside the house, but it is not as run-down as its exterior would suggest. Many of the gas lamps are dark, but a scattered few shine brightly in brackets of polished brass, throwing steady yellow light into the many rooms. Heavy drapes cover the windows, blocking the drowned blue light of the winter sky. As he leads me inside, he lights more of the lamps, pushing the shadows back into the dusty, cobwebbed corners.

This place was grand once. Dark wood furniture fills the drawing rooms and salons, shrouded now with cloths to keep off the dust. The air is thick with the smell of age and mice. Gilded mirrors adorn several of the walls. Their reflections make the cavernous rooms seem even larger than they are. As we move past, they throw back unexpected reflections, flickers of motion that snag at the corners of my eyes.

I realize I have not answered him. "Refreshment? No, I ... no thank you, sir. I require nothing but information, if it please you."

"I insist," he replies. "I have the most lovely black tea, brought here all the way from Dorlund. You really must try a cup." He steers me towards an empty dining room, then to doors in the rear. Beyond is a kitchen, immaculate and shining, large enough to prepare a feast for fifty. He gestures for me to sit, then releases my hand.

One of the stoves is lit. He walks over to it and picks up the kettle, then fills it with water from a stone basin. "I hope you will excuse my deplorable lack of staff, but it's just me and Eddard. And the lads, of course. I'm sure you of all people will understand why I prefer solitude."

I drop into a chair and nod. I do understand. I have endured the prejudices and fears of the ignorant; I know that particular sting. I think back to our last meeting, in the market, and about the attraction I felt towards him. Was that my body's way of telling me something I was not ready for?

Still, I sense there is more to Rath's invitation than a desire for comradeship. My knife hilt presses into the side of my knee. I cross my leg so that it rests near my hand; I can have it out in a heartbeat if I need to.

"Please, Kirin, relax. You're safe here," Rath says, softly, like a horse trainer trying to calm a skittish foal. His unctuous tone grates against my frayed nerves.

"That may be true, sir, but I prefer to be cautious." I smile sweetly as, inside, the tendrils of my magic shift and slide. Let him be amused by my wariness if he will.

Rath inclines his head, acknowledging my words with a wry smile. He busies his hands with the tea. The crushed leaves go into a silver strainer, then into a simple ceramic tea pot. Even from across the room I can smell it: a tang reminiscent of mint, on top of a deeper odor, thick and musky, like wormwood.

"I'm so glad you found your way here. Thank you for accepting my ... invitation," Rath says, pouring the steaming water into the pot. He puts the pot on a tray, then fetches cups and spoons.

"I'd hardly call sending your pet monsters to stalk me a proper invitation," I reply.

Rath shrugs. "And yet here you are. Would you really have accepted if I'd asked you politely to join me for tea and conversation? I think you would have thought me a rake and declined, lest I bore you with

some tedious plan to seduce you."

"I suppose I would have at that," I admit. "When we first met, I did think your intentions were more ... base. Nor did you try very hard to change that impression when we met the second time."

"Such is the life of a courtier," he replies with a laugh. "I have a reputation to uphold, and certain people would have noticed if I hadn't taken note of your very impressive physical charms. By doing so, I risked losing your good impression of me, but avoided drawing attention to myself. I do apologize."

I nod, accepting his explanation. For now. "Tell me," I say, "where did you learn to call them?"

"Direct; I like that. Very well, if that is how it's to be. I learned everything I know from my aunt."

He pours the tea into the cups, then asks with raised eyebrows if I want cream or sugar. I shake my head. Rath stirs a dollop of cream into his tea then takes a small bottle from his coat. "Medicine for my stomach pains," he says with an apologetic shrug, before adding a few clear drops to his cup.

"When I was thirteen," he continues, "I nearly died. An infection of the blood. The physicians my parents hired tried to help me, but nothing helped. Despite their treatments—some of which were only marginally less harmful than my malady—I continued to waste away. Eventually, the priests of Shanira were summoned, but by then I was little more than skin and bones."

"Why did your parents wait to call them?" I ask.

"They didn't want to incur the debt such aid would cost them. I do not fault them for it; I would have made the same choice."

"Debt? I don't understand. The priests of Shanira are charged with ridding the world of sickness and death wherever they find it."

Rath snorts dismissively. "Yes, I have heard that charming fiction before. It's amusing, is it not? Perhaps out on the frontier that is true, but not here in the City. Here the promise of healing is, for many, the ultimate gift, and the priests know it. They trade that coin for earthly riches and power."

"In any case, even after the illness was finally banished, it still left its mark on my body. I was frail and sickly, no longer fit for the games my brothers played. Instead, I turned to books. It was my aunt, Sete, who helped nurse me back to health, and who showed me the vast world contained within their pages."

Rath sips his tea and I follow suit, to be polite if for no other reason. The cup feels wonderfully warm in my cupped palms. The fragrant steam wreaths my face. It is bittersweet on my tongue, tasting of herbs and its own unique musk. Inside, I feel the first hesitant stirrings of ... something. A hesitation; an uncertainty. Not for the first time I wish my sister would return to me. She would know its cause.

"Aunt Sete was family by marriage, and was something of an outcast. My uncle was an officer and mapmaker, assigned to His Majesty's Exploratory Corps. He met her in some gods-forsaken village on the far side of the great southern jungles. He ran afoul of a hurduk while mapping routes through the great Southern Range. The beast's venom nearly killed him. Would have, without Sete's ministrations. Even so, his recovery took over a year, during which time my aunt nursed him. When he returned to the City, he brought Sete with him. They had fallen in love and been married while he recovered."

Rath smiles slightly. "It was all very scandalous, for prior to his journey, he had been betrothed to another. My grandmother, gods rest her, never quite recovered from the incident, and never truly accepted Aunt Sete as her daughter."

He pauses, then lifts his cup. "But I see that all of this family gossip bores you," he says. "It has been so long since I spoke to anyone about anything of consequence. As the youngest son, I enjoy a certain freedom of action compared to my older brothers, but even I spend far more time than I would like in courtly functions."

"It's all right," I say, taking another sip of my tea. "So, your aunt was a wise woman?"

"Indeed. Versed in all of nature's wisdom. Toxins and anti-venoms were her specialty, and the serpents who provided them were her most beloved companions. With her knowledge and exotic southern looks and ... other unique features ... is it any wonder that polite society shunned her?"

"No, it isn't. I know what it is like to be different. So, she taught you?"

"After a fashion," Rath says. "I had tutors aplenty, of course, but their wisdom seemed trite and dull. What boy would rather study sums or dry, dusty histories when they could learn to milk venom from the fangs of a snake or read about how root toxins can be used to stun fish swimming in a river?"

"And it was your aunt who taught you to commune with the spirits of the dead?"

He nods. "There are places in the south where such skills are not feared, but are praised. The women and men who master those mysteries are highly valued, for they allow the dead to speak again to the living. I would love to see such a place before I die. Perhaps, one day I will."

My tea has grown cold. I grimace at its bitterness, then put the cup down on the table.

"I was fifteen the first time she showed me how to call forth the spirit of a dead man," Rath continues. "He was a beggar, one of the thousands who die, unnoticed, every year. Sete paid the corpse-handlers' guild to bring him here, to our family's old estate, rather than bury him in the pauper's grave that was his intended resting place. I remember the feeling of wonderment, of power, I felt seeing the cold flesh twitch and stir. Her wisdom was so great that even death was no match for it."

I nod. I remember that feeling. The power of it.

A cramp ripples across my belly, and the warm glow of recollection shifts, pushed aside by growing unease. Phantom whispers spiral through my head, like echoes of my sister's voice. I feel a hot tightness behind my breastbone, different from the stirrings of the blood magic. Even as I consider it, the tightness increases, twisting in my vitals.

I flinch as unexpected agony ripples through me, stomach muscles cramping. The pain seeps into my chest, stealing away my breath. I look up at Rath, at the teacup between us. His tiny, satisfied smile shouts his guilt. The ghost voice in my head buzzes, a fly trapped against a window.

"What ... what did you do to me?" I whisper. It turns to a whistling groan as a fresh cramp racks me.

"Amnunthol extract," Rath says, putting down his own cup. "When pressed from the petals of the mature flower, it makes a most wonderful poison. Completely lethal once it is imbibed. It paralyzes the lungs and eventually the heart."

"But ... you drank ... the same tea..." I wheeze. The burning cramp drives deeper into my chest. I feel my heart skip a beat.

Rath smiles and holds up the tiny vial of medicine. "This counteracts the poison," he begins, then moves to block me as I lunge forward towards it. The toxin robs my limbs of all coordination, and I stagger half to my feet before he pushes me back down.

"It only works if it is mixed with the extract before consumption. Once the unadulterated poison is taken, there is no antidote. Death will be slow, I'm sorry to say, as your lungs slowly fail. Provided your heart doesn't give out first, of course." He is calm, almost detached, as he recites the details of my death.

"But ... why?" I gasp out.

In response, Rath rises and walks to me. He reaches into his shirt and draws forth a cameo. I recognize it: it was around his neck on the night we met, sparkling against the snowy linen of his shirt.

He snaps it open, and inside I see a portrait of an exotic, bronze-skinned woman. He holds it close to my face, turning it so that the gaslight falls across the picture.

Her eyes are black, two pools of ink set into her brown face. I know with perfect certainty that their appearance was no mistake of the painter's.

"Yes," he breathes. "You have her eyes. Of all things she knew, this was the only thing she refused to teach me. I asked her ... begged her ... to share it with me, but she would not be swayed. Sete said the price of such knowing was too great, and would not accept that I was ready for such wisdom. In the end, she took it with her to the grave."

"I ... I don't..." I try to say, but the creeping paralysis is inside my lungs now, robbing me of breath. My heart skips another beat, sending a fresh wave of excruciating pain through me. It squeezes tears from my black eyes; I feel them on my cheeks.

"Truthfully, I don't mean to hurt you, but I must know something," Rath says. "She had a marvelous ability, you see. She could see into a living body, hers or another's, and could command its very blood to do her bidding, healing, or destroying, with nothing more than a thought. Such power. Such power!"

"This wisdom gave her the ability to ingest any poison, any toxin, and suffer no ill effects. She often allowed snakes to bite her, precisely so that she could know their venom and prepare antidotes from her own blood. I believe that her power was what made her eyes, and yours, such a dramatic and unique shade. If I am right, it should be an ability you share."

"Enough ... talk ... Give me the antidote," I manage to say. This time, my magic suffuses the words, bridging the space between us. I see Rath flinch and move to rise, then stop himself.

"I wish I could help you, I really do, but I did not lie. Once the amnunthol is taken, there is no way to stop its course. There simply is no antidote."

Rath stoops and slides his arms beneath me, then lifts. I dangle, a sack of miscellaneous helplessness, unable to strike back or even draw a proper breath. He assiduously avoids my eyes; even in my weakened state I think I could hurt him badly, perhaps even kill him, if my gaze were allowed to meet his. He knows this.

"Look at ... look at..." I wheeze. He shushes me and carries me into one of the manor's sitting rooms. Rath lowers me, gently, to one of the shrouded couches. A pillow, smelling of dust and age, is slipped beneath my head.

"There now. I'll give you some privacy. I hope you can forgive me, but I find it unsettling to watch someone suffer. I'll return in an hour: by then, you'll have rid yourself of the amnunthol, or you'll have slipped into final sleep. I hope you'll believe me when I say that I wish you well."

Rath reaches down and relieves me of the Mor knife, sliding it carefully through his belt. He sketches a courtier's bow in my direction and walks back into the shadows. The footfalls recede, headed back

towards the kitchens.

I lie on the dusty couch, struggling for every breath. I feel my laboring heart, its beating even more ragged and uneven now. Even the ghost whisper has gone. All is silence. I am totally alone.

* * * *

I'm going to die here, I say to myself. Instinctively, I feel for my sister's presence, some hint that she is with me, but there is none. The tiny buzzing, the strange echo of a voice I heard before, is gone again. Was that her, trying to warn me?

I cannot think of this; I do not have the luxury of time. I don't know how long it will take the amnunthol to completely stop the pumping of my lungs or still my heart. Already black spots hover at the fringes of my vision. My face feels hot, then cold, alternating waves of discomfort. Sweat sheens my body.

He said she could stop any poison. And her eyes were black; as black as mine.

I have seen the blood magic heal. I know its destructive force, but I have also witnessed its power to make whole. Haven't I been tempted on so many occasions to call upon it, as I did for Lia, and for Captain Garrett?

I must try. If I do not, Rath will return to find only my dead body. Afterwards, he will doubtless summon a sweetling from my cooling flesh.

The thought sends a bolt of undiluted panic through me, momentarily pushing back the awful pressure tightening in my chest. I take two deep, shuddering breaths before the steel bands once more bear down. My heart pounds in my chest, rhythmic for the moment. The dark spots recede from my vision.

I must try. Now. Before the poison steals away the last of my strength.

Silently, I call out to the tendrils of crimson magic roiling in my belly. I feel them responding, hesitantly. I command them to seek out the poison invading my body and drive it out.

The power shifts, as if it is uncertain what to do. The tightness in my chest redoubles, momentarily cutting off all breath. Panic beats about me with midnight wings.

I try to remember exactly what I did when I healed Lia, and Garrett. Then the power was assured, responding to my knowledge and my desires, traveling just where it was needed. What was different then? What was it?

I close my eyes and imagine the structures of my lungs. I have seen the organs in cadavers, as well as in my mistress's healing atlases, and the memory comes easily. In my mind's eye I picture the twin sacs, expanding and contracting in response to the muscled bellows beneath them, drawing in life-giving air. I recall the thick arteries and veins running in and through them, mighty rivers of blood pushed there directly from the nearby heart.

I feel the blood magic responding, uncoiling from its usual place in my belly and moving up, past my chest. In my mind's eye I see it: translucent tendrils of rose-tinged force, terrible yet subtle, reaching up, then slipping down the other opening in my throat.

They descend, forcing their way gently into the crimson cathedral of my lungs. My inner sight travels with them, riding along as they burrow deep. The vision they give me is exquisite and strange, imparting a sensation of falling, as if I am shrinking, tinier and tinier, until a field mouse would seem larger than the mightiest leviathan.

The magic pauses in the lungs, as if awaiting instruction. I look around at the flesh all around me, expanding and contracting. Some instinct tells me that the organs are healthy, performing their function faithfully. But I can tell they are not filling properly; they only draw in a small fraction of their capacity. Wherever the poison is, it is not here.

The magic presses lower, until it encounters a thick shelf of muscle. As the muscle contracts, it pulls against the lungs resting atop it. As it constricts, I draw a shuddering breath, then push it out.

I see the blood magic split, again and again, into countless hair-fine tendrils. They pierce the tough muscle, questing for the invader. Far away, as if it is happening to someone else, I feel my body twisting, as it blindly reacts to the sensation of drowning. I ignore it. I must not be distracted.

My sight follows the blood magic, watching the tendrils shrink and stretch, still dividing, until each is much finer than a hair. I see the individual components of my body: oblong muscle cells, standing side-by-side in endless, interlocking rows; rivers of deep red blood cells traveling down the round highways of my veins, bumping and jostling together like cattle crammed into too small a pen.

The cells are like the illustrations in my mistress's ancient healing atlas, but vastly more complex than I could ever have imagined. The magic approaches an intricate structure, like a mighty tree, dark and branched. Its trunk stretches away, out of sight.

As I watch, a surge of energy, perfectly clear to my inner vision, travels down the trunk, spreading with eyeblink quickness through its many branches. As it does, myriad cells around it contract, pulling together. I look aside and see untold thousands of similar trunks, similar branches, all pulsing with life energy, all pulling together.

No. Not all. Some of the trees are dark, cut off from the pulses of light. Something covers them, black in my inner sight. I peer closer and see the darkness is spreading, moving from one structure to another with alarming speed. Wherever it touches, the life glow is blocked. Where this happens, the surrounding tissues do not contract, but sit, motionless and unresponsive.

That is the poison, I whisper silently to the blood magic. It must be removed, and carefully. Do it now.

The tendrils obey, reaching towards a blackened tree. They penetrate the darkness, drawing it into itself. The blood magic turns dusky, then completely black, as the poison is absorbed. The tree grows lighter, then responds to the pulses of life energy still surging towards it, feebly at first, then with growing strength.

The blackness is pulled into the tendril, then is ferried beyond the limit of my sight to some unknown destination. The tendril is once more rose-tinted, completely unaffected by the toxin it has consumed. I see it turn, questing for fresh prey. All around, to the limits of my inner sight, I see more and more of the glassy tentacles, spearing the blackness and sucking it into themselves.

I send a portion of my attention outwards, and dimly feel the tightness in my chest easing. My breath comes easier now, the deadly pressure receding with every inhalation.

Looking back within, I see more and more of the branching structures emerging from the blackness covering them, the cells surrounding them once more pulsing rhythmically in a mighty, intricate dance, choreographed by surges of lifelight.

The poison travels away from my lungs in streams of dead black. I do not know where the blood magic is taking it, nor do I care—all I know is that I can breathe once again. But even as my breathing eases, I sense a lingering pressure, like a great weight pressing into my chest. The poison is still inside of me.

I gather the blood magic's multitude of strands, braiding them together and sending them up the mighty vessel leading to my heart. They push against the pulsing tide, a river of countless purple-blue blood cells. As the blood enters the lungs, some alchemy causes the cells to change, turning them bright red before being drawn away, pushed to the farthest recesses of my flesh.

Into the dark flood the blood magic swims, until it reaches the threshold of my heart. My inner eye sees the mighty gates, watches the opening and closing of the three-lobed valve. The magic extrudes a tendril, almost impossibly thin, and slips through the pulsing opening. I follow it inside.

There, I see more of the blackness, covering more of the tree-like structures. As in the lungs, they block the pulses of lifelight wherever they touch, interrupting the crucial constriction of cells. I command the blood magic to destroy the invader, and it responds eagerly, flowing over the blackness and drawing it into itself and away. I feel the pressure in my chest ease.

When I can see no more poison, I command the magic to withdraw, watching as it delicately gathers itself. Like a receding tide it flows back, regrouping itself in my belly, absorbing the numberless tentacles. I allow my inner eye to slip closed, returning my attention to the world outside.

It is much like emerging from a deep sleep, although I can remember everything with burning clarity. I open my mortal eyes and see the familiar, darkened parlor. My breath comes easy and unlabored. My heart beats, even and strong.

My stomach cramps as the blood magic twists, savagely pushing something up from my belly. I have time to lean over the side of the dusty couch before I retch something up, a tight ball of indescribable filth. I spit it out, and it splatters against the dirty floorboards; a capsule of blackness, no larger than the end of my thumb. Its stench, heavy and organic, fills the air.

It is so tiny for something so lethal, a mass of dead cells contaminated by Rath's vicious poison. I lie on my side and stare at it for a moment, my senses disoriented by the sudden switch away from my secret vision. Sweat bathes my body, as if I have run for miles. A noise reaches me from the rear of the house, refocusing my attention.

Rath. He said he would return in an hour. I do not know how long I was inside of myself; there time had no meaning. I heave myself to my feet, staggering a bit as blood rushes to my head. My legs tremble. I am so tired.

No time for that. I hear his footsteps in the hall, coming closer. I do not know what he will do to me, now that I have survived his attempted murder, but I do not mean to wait to find out.

I slip behind a shrouded chair near the entrance to the parlor, crouching in the dusty darkness. Rath's footsteps draw near. He passes me, striding towards the couch.

"Milady? Are you still with us? I—" He stops, staring down at the empty space I so recently occupied.

Even before he stops speaking, I am rising, moving behind him. My knife is in my hands, the precious Ulean steel blade that I hid in my boot.

A board creaks beneath my foot, and Rath spins, his hand dropping to the sheathed Mor knife still resting at his hip. I step forward, inside the reach of his own blade, and my knife point digs into the hollow beneath his chin. His hiss of indrawn breath cuts the stillness of the parlor.

"Still with you, my Lord, aye. You'll live to regret that," I grate, pushing on the blade until it slices into his flesh. Blood wells up in the dimpled recess, trickling down the steel.

"Milady, please, a moment if you will. I can explain," he replies. I can sense that he is striving to remain calm, but the fear in his voice is clear. Good. Let him be afraid.

"I think not," I whisper, smiling. "You tried to poison me, and if not for my power, you would have succeeded. Since you're so curious about it, it's only fair I share it with you. Look at me."

The words carry the power of command, unfettered and irresistible. I feel Rath jerk, then he lowers his face, even though the motion drives the knife point deeper into his neck. His motions are wooden and stiff, a puppet on tangled strings.

I lower the blade and step back. The moment my eyes meet his, I feel the blood magic shifting, unfolding inside of me like some enormous, dark flower. It keens for his blood, surging against the bounds of my will. Waves of hunger roll out from it, washing across my body.

"Please ... don't..." he gasps. His face grows pale, the blood draining away as he realizes the extent of his peril.

The manor door crashes open as his minions slam into it. Rath's sweetlings tumble into the hall, then turn towards the parlor. They are a mass of nightmare forms and churning, barbed limbs, hooved feet clattering on the dusty floor boards as they scramble for purchase. Red murder is in their opaline eyes, shining even brighter than the madness that always resides there.

I allow the blood magic to slide deep inside Rath's body, shivering in ecstasy and revulsion as I feel it extrude myriad barbed hooks. The magic threads itself through his soft, yielding tissues. I give them a sharp tug, and blood seeps from a dozen ruptured vessels, the phantom taste communicated back into me through the connection we now share. He moans, his face suddenly pale.

"Tell them to stop or I'll pull your life out by the roots," I say with relish.

He knows it is no bluff. The creatures instantly halt, just outside the room. They strain against his control like eager hounds, senses inflamed by the presence of such nearby prey.

"Please..." Rath tries again, forcing the words past the grip of my magic. "I ... have a ... reason ... for what I did. There is ... someone you must ... meet."

"No. The time for social pleasantries is long past."

"If you kill me..." he gasps, as the blood magic pulls again, "then you will ... never know ... why the Mor hate you so."

I pause, palm outstretched. All I need do is close my hand and he will die. The moment he does, the sweetlings will depart, their souls flying free when the fetters of his will are removed. If I kill him, I will be safe.

But I must know.

"You lie," I say, my mind racing. "You know nothing. All you care about is living for another few moments." I twitch my fingers, a move that my power echoes in his flesh.

He grimaces in pain but still manages a smile. "I do not ... lie. I know ... the reason. But I had to be sure ... you had the power. I ... need you!"

He sags, struggling for breath. The sweetlings shift and strain, yearning to attack. He shakes his head, unable to continue. I voice a frustrated sigh.

"Send them away and I will release you. But make one move to threaten me..." I give the magic a fresh tug and Rath moans. Blood oozes from his nose, twin freshets of crimson. His face is as pale as a corpse's. All he can do is nod. A moment later, the creatures withdraw, shambling back towards the door. I wait until the clatter of their feet recedes.

I command the blood magic to withdraw, and after a moment it responds, releasing its barbs and slipping free of his flesh. I feel a bone-deep loathing at the sensation, mixed with a wild elation. I swore, to myself, and to others, that I would never use that knowledge again. But what choice did I have? As soon as it is free, Rath sags, sprawling on a dusty chair.

I sit across from him, far enough that he cannot lunge at me but close enough that the power of command in my voice can easily reach his ears. The steel knife rests in my fist, a much more obvious but far less deadly threat. It comforts me, nevertheless.

"Talk."

Rath spits blood onto the floor, struggling to compose himself. For an instant, I see murder in his eyes, ugly and savage. Then it is gone, pushed behind his courtier's facade.

"I'll be happy to, milady, but it's easier ... if I show you." He holds up a trembling hand, forestalling my protest. "I give you my word I will do nothing else to harm you."

"Your word?" I scoff. "What is that worth?"

He shakes his head. "I meant what I said: I have no personal desire to harm you, but I had to know that you were the one. I need you, Kirin. Please."

He sounds sincere, but I have seen the snarling beast that lives behind his eyes. He and I share the secret of communion with the dead, but this does not mean we are similar in any other way; my mistake was to think perhaps we were. I will not make it again.

"Come, we should go. You'll want to see this," he says, taking my silence as acceptance. He seems weary and sore. I come to my feet beside him, the steel in my fist glittering in the dim light. I gesture for him to lead the way, and together we step out into the chill afternoon light.

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CHAPTER FIFTEEN

We are still on the steps when I hear the sound of running feet. I look aside, and see Rath's man, Eddard, appear from the darkness, into the square of light cast through the open door. He raises his studded club, grinning. I do not fear the likes of him. The crimson magic uncoils in my belly, singing for his blood and sending a hot bolt of savage pleasure through me.

"No!" Rath screams. "Eddard, get back! I order you!"

The man halts, a look of confusion eclipsing the savage humor of a moment before. The club sags down. "Sir, I don't understand. Your face—"

"You will leave her be! I command you."

Eddard hesitates, torn between his instinct to obey and his desire to hurt me. I wait, calmly, the blood magic sweet in my throat. If he so much as takes one step towards me, I will strike, promises be damned.

His shoulders sag as he relents. The blood magic wails, wordlessly, as I pull it deeper inside of me. Its disappointment ripples over me, colder than the wind. Rath walks towards the closed front gates. I follow behind, and a moment later we slip through the barred portal.

"Command your creatures to stay here," I demand.

Rath nods and keeps walking. I look behind, and see no signs that anyone or anything is following.

"Where are you taking me?"

"I promised you I'd show you the reason for poisoning you."

"You also said you know why the Mor hate me," I add.

Rath looks back at me over his shoulder. His eyes light with wry amusement. "So, it's true. They really do hate you," he breathes.

"You didn't know?" I bark, a fresh surge of anger flowing over me.

"I ... deduced that it might be the case, yes," he replies.

"How? Why would you think that?" I say, wondering what else he knows about me.

"I have my reasons. Ones I will share with you at the proper time." A satisfied smile turns up the corners of his lips. Red magic wells up, pushing into my throat, hungry for violence.

"So you were lying when you said you know their reasons? Did you say that just to spare your skin?" I ask, striving to stay in control.

"No, it's not a lie. At least, I don't think so," he replies, seeming oblivious to his peril. I take a deep breath and force the magic down once more. Like it or not, we have a bargain, and I will not be the one to dishonor myself by breaking it. Is a trivial bit of honor, but I cling to it. I have so little left.

"Can you tell me what happened?" Rath asks. "What made you realize the way the Mor feel about you?"

I weigh the merits of replying, resisting the urge to remain silent simply to spite him. I cannot know the

extent of his wisdom. If he can give me the answers I seek, then I must risk telling him more.

"When I was on the wall," I begin, "I sensed the Mor were looking for something. I opened my secret eye, and it seemed, in that moment, they could see me as well. When they did, their spirits all reacted very violently. They—"

"You saw them? You actually saw their ghosts?" Rath asks, stopping in the middle of the road. I pause as well, maintaining the distance between us.

"What I wouldn't give to see them," he babbles. "To command them! Can you imagine? With such material at my disposal, the things I could do..."

I wait for him to finish, saying nothing. His eyes are a thousand miles distant, no doubt distracted by visions of summoning sweetlings from the Mor's monstrous flesh.

"If you desire to see dead Mor so badly then all you need to do is man the wall. I can recommend a good spot," I say, not bothering to hide my sarcasm.

"Of course. I meant no harm," he says, seemingly chastised. "This way."

Together, we wind our way through the labyrinthine streets of Low Town. The buildings crowd close, leaning towards one another. Every window is shuttered tight against, I imagine, unwelcome eyes as well as the biting chill.

Rath walks down the narrow street, stepping carefully across the channel of slushy brown filth running down the center of the cobbles. The street smells terrible despite the cold, a thick stew of human waste, cooking vegetables and hopelessness. Low drifts of snow lie piled against the buildings' walls, glazed with frozen rain. After a time, he turns and walks to a building, one like a hundred others we have passed.

Once, many years ago, someone tried painting the closed shutters blue. Now they are faded and chipped, the grimy cerulean hanging from the battered wood in strips. It is the place's only attempt at decoration. The rest is all decaying wood and crumbling brick, like every other house on the row. Rath opens the unlocked front door and peers into the darkness beyond before stepping inside.

"Ware the floor: it's a bit rotted next to the stairs," he warns me. The boards creak beneath his booted feet.

I follow, careful to step only in his muddy footprints. The only light comes from the City's pale, reflected cloud glow, radiating through the dim skylight three floors above. It is barely enough to make out the dim shape of the stairs, and the piles of trash heaped against the walls.

We ascend the stairs to the second floor. The smells of boiling cabbage and too many people crammed into too small a space intensify, until I must breathe through my mouth to endure it. Rath walks to an unmarked door at the end of the hall and slips a key into the keyhole. He fumbles with it for a moment, then throws a breathless laugh back over his shoulder.

"I'm sorry, but I'm very excited," he says. "I've been waiting months—years—for someone who can appreciate this. And, to help, of course."

I breathe across the coils of the blood magic, rousing them to wakefulness with a thought. His words could be a warning to whoever is inside. I pity them, and him, if that is the case. The lock finally yields, and Rath pushes open the warped door with a shove. Dim candlelight stretches a golden finger into the squalid hallway,

"*Napaula, mi truko de ardenta!*" he says, stepping inside. I do not recognize the language. He turns, looking at someone inside, then opens his arms, as if to embrace them.

"*Llaurto li porta, Napaula. Di et roloto li vatanti sul Kirin.*"

I walk past the threshold and into the apartment. It is a simple, two room affair with scuffed floors and a low, soot-blackened ceiling. Water has gotten behind one of the walls. There the plaster has fallen away, exposing the jagged lathing. The ammonia-laden stench of rats lingers near the dark hole, mixed with the damp odor of mold.

In the glow of the single, half-burnt taper, I make out a few mismatched pieces of furniture, littering the floor: a much-mended chair; a threadbare, lop-sided divan, no doubt rescued from some rubbish tip. I see a huddled figure on the divan. Rath embraces the figure and I see wizened arms rise to pat his shoulders. Dark spots mar the papery skin.

"Kirin, I'd like to introduce you to Napaula. Napaula is very, very special." He steps back and I see an old woman on the couch, wrapped in a gray woolen shawl. Her shrunken-apple face peers out at me from the folds of her hood, surrounded by a corona of wispy white hair. Her faded gray eyes shine bird-bright, nestled in deep canyons of wrinkled skin. She nods and smiles at me, showing me her toothless, black gums. I nod back, unsure how to address her.

"*Tota, Napaula. T'pel muarda vetistas, eh?*" Rath asks, offering her his hand.

"*Lodos m'tet, vuldardare,*" she replies in kind, the words as shrill as the sound of a rusty hinge. She grasps him and, with his assistance, heaves herself to her feet. As she rises, the shawl falls away, exposing her body for the first time. I blink in shock, trying to make sense of the sight.

Napaula stretches her back, wincing as the motion unearths some old pain, and grins toothlessly as I try not to stare. Her body is thin to the point of gauntness, the bones in her arms clearly visible in the dim light. Her legs are two sticks; her knees twisted knobs of bone, distended with arthritis and age. She follows the line of my gaze with a knowing smile and reaches down to cradle her swollen belly. The gesture, so familiar to me from my time with my sister, is at once so intimate and so telling that it confirms the impossibility of what I am seeing.

Napaula, despite the many decades since the flowering of her womanhood, is pregnant.

"But ... how can this be?" I ask, my wariness, for the moment, pushed aside. Napaula's eyes meet mine. I see the beatific joy there, an expression belonging to a much younger woman. It is a look only a mother can possess.

"My baby, he sleep," the old woman says in the Imperial tongue. Her accent is thick, its burring drawl wrapped around the words like a blanket, softening their edges.

"But when did this—?" I begin, but the old woman holds up a forestalling hand.

"First, we drink tea. You wait," she commands, shuffling towards the small stove.

She makes the preparations, pouring water into the battered tin pot and placing fuel into the iron stove. Rath makes no move to help; instead he drops into the mended chair and watches her. Fondness shines in his dark eyes. I sit on the edge of the divan, close enough for him to hear my whispered words.

"She must be eighty. How can she be pregnant?"

"She'll tell you, after you have tea. She's very proud of her son, although I think sometimes she regrets

that she's never seen him, even after all these decades."

"Decades?" the word escapes me, louder than I intended. Napaula looks up at the sound, then laughs a toothless laugh. She returns to her chore, pulling out mismatched cups.

"What are you playing at?" I demand. "It's impossible that a woman could get pregnant and remain so for decades. This is just another of your games."

Rath shrugs. "Maybe it's impossible, but there she stands. I have examined her and I can assure you her condition is not some sort of madness; there is indeed a life inside of her. Of a sort, anyway."

I open my mouth to ask him how he can know this, then I remember. Rath can summon sweetlings of his own. He must share my secret sight. I know from my own experience that it does not give the clarity the blood magic does, but it does grant the ability to see the ebb and flow of life itself, as well as allow the possessor to see, and command, the spirits of the recently departed.

Carefully, I let my inner eye slip open, then train my gaze on the old woman. The glow of her life radiates from inside her frail flesh, mellow as banked coals, dim yet steady. The marks of hard living are graven into the deepest places of her body, a tapestry of pain and sacrifice. Her heart pulses in her thin chest, as it has for the better part of a century. Its beating stirs her inner light.

Dark spots mar the glowing tapestry—places where sickness has taken hold. It is everywhere: in her liver, and stomach, and skin. Even in her bones. She should be in agony but she seems to not notice. I allow my gaze to slide down, to the tight dome beneath her sagging breasts, and my breath catches in my throat.

Whatever is inside her defies my vision. It shines with a terrible yet lovely un-light, like a dark star, eclipsing Napaula's life glow while simultaneously allowing it to move past, and even through, it. I bear down, forcing my secret sight deeper. For just a moment, I see the vague outlines of a tiny form, nestled in the center of the shadow, then some force reaches out and shoves me away.

I gasp, staggered by the enormous power which has repulsed me. The rebuke was casual, almost negligent. I sense that it could have done me grievous harm had it wanted to; had it been awake to itself.

"Gods," I whisper, struggling to keep from swaying in my seat. "It's ... I don't know what it is."

"I can't see it, either," Rath admits. "But there it is. Whatever lives in her body is something unique; something special."

"Worth almost killing me for?"

Rath nods, impervious to my ire. Perhaps he simply does not care.

Napaula shuffles back to us, a cup in her hand, and Rath finally rises to help her. He fetches the others and returns. The cup he hands me is delicate and lovely, a column of cloudy, scratched glass set into a tarnished silver holder. The tea within is dark and strong, steaming in the chilly air.

"Surely you don't expect me to drink anything you offer me?" I ask him, coldly.

"Sharing tea is a sacred ritual amongst Napaula's people," he continues, sipping from his own cup. "If you want her cooperation, you'd best not insult her hospitality. Besides, now that you are aware of it, could something as mundane as poison slipped into tea ever harm you again? You have nothing to fear."

I take the cup. He is right. I take a small sip of the scalding liquid, rolling the sweet brew across my

tongue. It is redolent with the aroma of herbs and an aftertaste like roasted nuts. I resist the urge to turn my secret sight inward to see if it is affecting me; I will know soon enough if it contains anything harmful. If it does, I will not hesitate to do what I must: I will kill Rath and use the vitality in his blood to purge it from my body, answers be damned.

We sit and drink for a few minutes. Napaula looks at us with approving smiles. She seems to be enjoying herself, the candlelight glittering merrily in her eyes. If not for the impossible swell of her belly, she could be any other good-natured old woman.

She and Rath exchange pleasantries, sometimes in her tongue, sometimes in halting Imperial. Rath hangs on her every word. There is a gleam of something ravenous underneath his adoring gaze when he looks at her, a hunger which stills my tongue. I must wait, and watch, and learn all I can.

"Now we talk," she announces, after I have tentatively drained half of my cup. "Rath say you want know about baby."

"Yes," I agree, uncertain how to begin. "Napaula, I know something of children. About what it means to not be able to bear them. I—"

"My baby sleep," the old woman announces, patting her belly gently. "He sleep long time. Very long time. He good boy."

"Sleeps?" I echo, struggling to understand her. "Napaula, how old were you when you became pregnant?"

She frowns, and I worry she does not understand what I am asking. Then she smiles once more, and I realize that she was trying to remember. "I marry when fourteen, when I become woman. Murten my husband. He very handsome. Strong." She giggles like a much younger woman, covering her toothless mouth with her hand.

Her good humor falters a bit. "We try to make baby. No baby. Murten sad. I want to make happy. We try many things, but—" she makes a *tching* noise and shrugs, frowning.

"I talk to wise women in village. I do what she say, but still no baby. Two year we try. Murten very sad now. Angry. I hear talk in village. They say: Napaula barren. I cry. I beg gods to bless me, but they not listen.

"One day, Murten tell me he want new wife. She give him sons. I ... I afraid." Napaula drops her eyes, recalling her shame, and I resist my own stinging tears.

It was much the same with me. I can recall all too clearly the sense of failure, the feeling my body had betrayed me. That was almost worse than Urik's disappointment, and later his rage and accusations.

I reach out and pat her withered hand. "I understand. My husband blamed me for our lack of a child as well."

Napaula nods, covering my hand with hers. It is surprisingly warm, soft as old chamois. Her pulse is steady and strong. She throws a look at Rath, equal parts amusement and scorn. "Man always blame woman. But sometimes seed cannot flower, even in good soil. I know now."

"So, what did you—?"

A look of shame creeps over her face. She hesitates. When she speaks again, her voice is soft, barely a whisper. "I not want to be alone. Shamed, no good for marry. I do something. I make promise to

Murten, but I break. For him, I break."

I turn her words over in my head, trying to unravel them. It is the look of misery in her eyes that reveals her meaning. "You took a lover," I say, sure even as I speak the words that I am right.

"Only for baby! I never love him. Never! I love Murten! I do for him," she says swiftly.

"Of course you did," I assure her. If things had been different in my own marriage, I might well have done the same.

"I lay with other man three times, when wise woman say time is best. After, I never see him again. I pray to gods to forgive my sin.

"A month later, wise woman tell me I pregnant. I still share Murten's bed. Murten so happy when I tell him. I pray baby be his, but I know." She smiles, a bittersweet expression, tears sparkling in her rheumy eyes. The smile falters.

"When baby is still more than two moons away, I feel pain. Very bad. I bleed. Murten, he is away, driving herds to market.

"My mother, she dead when I was little girl, so I go alone to wise woman. She is with other girl. Her time has come. Baby come. I wait. The baby hurt me. I cry, but stay quiet. I wait long time. Other girl, she scream in pain. I cannot breathe. I start to cry. The gods punish me. Murten not know what I do but they do."

In my mind's eye I can see her, a girl of sixteen or seventeen, scared and alone, listening to the cries of a woman in labor. I can feel her guilt and terror, her sense of helplessness in the face of what her body is doing. I squeeze her hand, trying to send her strength.

"Other girl scream and scream. I know my baby will die. I ... I run away. Into the streets. Between buildings. Nobody can see. Blood on legs. Blood everywhere." She wipes her palms across her spindly thighs, staring down. I wonder if she is seeing it again, seeing the ebb of her child's life blood.

"I sit. I pray to gods: Do not kill my baby. Please. I sing to him. I ask him to stop hurting. To go to sleep. And then," she pauses, groping for the right word. She finds it, a radiant smile breaking across her face like the sun emerging from behind storm clouds. "Something wonderful happen."

"What?" I ask, riveted.

Napaula's joy pushes aside the shame that was graven on her face just a moment before. "The baby listen. He stop hurting. Go to sleep. I spend night there, afraid of move. I soil myself; I cannot help it. I do not wake him. When morning come, I very cold, and I hurt, but baby still sleep.

"Every day, I sing and he stay asleep. Sometimes he talk to me in dreams. He say the gods forget him. So long as he sleep, the gods will not take him."

I look over at Rath. He stares back, cool and inscrutable. Silently I curse him; he must have had the chance to examine her, to learn the truth of Napaula's words.

"Napaula, I'd like a moment to speak to Rath alone."

She nods and caresses her belly, snatches of some distant Southern song already on her lips. I rise and Rath follows me out into the dark hall.

"What do you think? Isn't that the most amazing story you've ever heard?" he says the moment the door closes.

"I think the child must have died, but somehow stayed inside of her. I'm not sure how she managed to sicken, or what happened to the babe's body, but—"

"How can you say that?" Rath snaps. "You saw what is in her. Was that some illusion? Or do you think maybe she's possessed? I'm sure the priests will accept that answer, but I will not."

"I saw ... something," I admit. "But I do not know what. Whatever it is, it's strong. And doesn't want to be seen."

"Well, it's not a case of possession, that much I do know," Rath insists. "I found her in the market almost two years ago, selling pottery and other trinkets. She tried to hide her condition, but I sensed something odd about her, and my inner vision confirmed my suspicions."

"But she was cautious, and resisted telling me her story. It took me weeks, but finally she came to trust me and admitted she had been hiding from the priests of Shanira for years."

"Hiding? Why? Couldn't they help her?"

Rath shrugs. "She's had run-ins with those pompous fools in the past. She hurt herself several years ago: slipped on some stairs and broke her arm. The wound sickened, until she was worried she would lose her arm, so she went to a healer, only to learn the gangrene was too far gone to cure with mortal medicines. Desperate, half delirious with fever and agony, she went to Shanira's temple, seeking relief. When they examined her, they could not fail to notice her true condition."

"The priests treated the gangrene and restored the bone, and when they were done they tried to 'cure' her unnatural pregnancy. She was already well past the age when women can become pregnant, you see. When their healing powers failed to begin her labor, or to explain the nature of the child, they accused Napaula of consorting with demons. They threatened to cut it out, for the good of her immortal soul."

"Somehow, she managed to escape them, and swore she would never confide in a priest ever again."

I ponder his words, shifting from foot to foot in the dank hallway. My disgust for the priests and their foolish superstitions is sour in my mouth.

"I didn't believe her possessed, of course," Rath continues, "but just to be sure, I hired a man to examine her. An ex-priest who had been driven from his order for drinking and other vices. Even though the power of his god was no longer with him, he confirmed that Napaula does not have any of the signs associated with possession: scarring; wounds that refuse to heal; speaking in tongues; aversion to sunlight, or to water blessed in one of the Temples of the Nine."

"You were very thorough; I congratulate you. But I still don't understand ... what do you want of me?"

Rath leans forward, and whispers, "I've been trying to convince Napaula to deliver the baby. You've seen the patterns of her life, yes?" I nod. "Then you saw the sickness that was everywhere within her."

He does not even bother to wait for my acknowledgement, but pushes on, clearly excited to be sharing his thoughts with one who can understand them. "I think the baby is indeed asleep, or as close to that state as something as ancient as it is can be. It's been slumbering inside of her for more than seven decades. After careful study, I've come to believe that whatever magic she somehow invoked is weakening. I think that the babe is poisoning her, and will eventually kill her. If she dies, then the babe will die as well."

"But how can you know—"

"I've been studying her for months, Kirin. You'll just have to trust me."

His words drag a savage bark of laughter from my belly, which echoes from the squalid walls. "Again you ask for my trust. You tried to poison me, as I recall."

"Oh please, we really must get past that," he snarls peevishly. "You have to try to see the bigger picture here."

"Which is?"

"An old woman's life, and that of her unborn babe. Surely your hatred of me will not overwhelm your compassion? If the child has even a slim chance at life, will you really deny it simply because I did what was required to confirm your powers?"

There is more than what he is telling me, I can sense it, but his words penetrate the armor of my skepticism all the same. I can feel the tenuous walls I have built around my maternal instincts crumbling, torn aside by Napaula's plight. I draw in a shuddering breath and drop my eyes to the stained, warped floorboards.

"I'm not saying I'll help you, but if I did, what would you have me do?"

"There is a process known to the midwives of the south. A surgical process, whereby the child is removed from the mother through a slit in the belly—"

I nod. "The process was known to my mistress as well." Rath blinks at me, clearly startled by my words.

"I've never seen it done," I continue, "but I read about it in her books. It is a risky procedure, one that, if done improperly can cause—" I stop. I see now what Rath wants.

"If done wrong, it causes massive bleeding," Rath finishes for me. "Bleeding that, at Napaula's age, she would not have a prayer of surviving."

It is madness. She cannot survive the process. Cutting her will kill her. Impossible.

I push open Napaula's door and look in at her. She sits in her chair, still singing to her sleeping son, rocking slowly back and forth, crooning words that have traveled a thousand miles, and many decades, to reach this place.

What does *impossible* mean to someone like her? Or me?

"Very well. I will examine her, if she will allow it. But I warn you: I sense there is something else, something you've not told me. I will find out what it is, I promise you."

Rath holds up his hands in surrender, his sardonic smile returning. "I desire only to help Napaula and her child, I assure you. We should trust one another, yes?"

"You should have thought of that before giving me poison in a tea cup," I reply, striving for the coldest possible tone I can muster. "And do not think I have forgotten the other thing you promised me."

Rath nods. "The Mor. I have not forgotten. Although I warn you: you may not thank me for sharing my wisdom. Now, let us go and tell Napaula the good news."

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CHAPTER SIXTEEN

I walk through the swirling night fog, and see my street ahead. Seldom have I seen a more welcome sight. It beckons to me, streetlamps shining in the gloom. Mist swirls and eddies around them, turning each one into an island of glowing light shrouded by a cloud of tenebrous gray. The damp penetrates my still-damp cloak, adding to the chill I carry inside. The thought of my warm bed pulls me forward, giving me the strength to put one foot in front of another. Soon I will be home.

Weariness makes my limbs heavy, leaden. The last few hours have been a trial, both physically and mentally, a contest against my power's insatiable hunger. If my discipline had slipped, even for a moment...

No. Best not to think of such things.

At the old woman's insistence, I examined her in her squalid room, first with my secret sight, then aided by the deeper vision imparted by the blood magic. I am still no closer to understanding her condition. As I walk, head down inside my concealing hood, eyes fixed on the cobbles beneath my feet, I ponder what little I have learned.

The magic confirmed for me what my secret vision suggested: Napaula is indeed riddled with pockets of corruption. Cancers of differing kinds have invaded her organs, have made inroads even into her very skin and bones, establishing their dark colonies in almost every part of her aged body. And they are growing.

I am still no closer to understanding her seeming good health; in her condition she should be nearly paralyzed with wracking pain. Her lungs are badly infested, the dark breeding ground for several large, tumors, and move less than half of the volume of air that they should. Her kidneys are scarred and shrunk. Even her bowels are riddled with the disease. When I ask her, Napaula complains bitterly of their sluggishness and the pain she feels on the chamber pot.

I think of the power I have seen displayed by the priests of Shanira and bite back a snarl. Doubtless they could call on their goddess to purge the cancers if they desired to do so, but even if I could convince the old woman to visit them they would shun her as unclean or possessed—or worse.

Rath is still convinced that the sickness is a result of her unnatural pregnancy. I find no solid evidence to contradict him, however, I remain unconvinced. When I masqueraded as a wise woman, I saw many elders with symptoms as bad as Napaula's, or worse, often at a far younger age. Her maladies very well might be natural.

Except for her pregnancy. Nothing in my experience explains that single, impossible fact. It taints everything I know, or think I know, about her.

The babe is still a mystery, despite my best efforts to get a glimpse of it. Whatever lives inside of the old woman is powerful, that much is certain. Neither my secret sight nor the unique vision granted me by the blood magic can penetrate the concealment it has gathered around itself. Every time I tried to glimpse it, my efforts were rebuked, its shroud as impenetrable as a stone wall.

During the third, and last, attempt, I was pushed violently out. Its power stole my breath away, and my sight grew dim. I opened my mortal eyes to find myself sprawled on the floor. The room spun about my head, slow as a water wheel. That time, I sensed something from the hidden child: the ghost of emotion. Fear. It knew, somehow, that we were trying to see it.

Rath suggested we abandon the examination and start fresh the following day. Napaula was exhausted and I was little better, swaying, half-asleep on my feet. He seemed very pleased with himself when we left, once more every bit the thoughtful, gallant courtier. He left a bag, clinking with silver, on the table next to her narrow bed, and offered to pay for a carriage to take me home.

But I wanted to walk alone under the chill skies, to ponder what little I had learned, and wrestle with a dozen contradicting theories. Now I regret that decision: the carriage would have had me home nearly an hour ago.

I turn the corner leading to the house that Lia and I share, and stop. A window on the lower level of the townhouse is lit, the panes glowing with amber lamplight. I turn and look towards the great clock atop the palace tower. Dawn is only three hours away. As I climb the steps to the front door, I wonder if Lia is still up. The first fingers of dread creep past the weariness enveloping me. All I want is the sweet oblivion of sleep; I do not want to explain my whereabouts to Lia.

An unfamiliar cloak hangs on the hook inside the door, a man's garment judging by the size and cut, made of rich blue wool trimmed with silver embroidery. Tiny shells and delicate swirling runes are stitched on its hem, suggestive of the flowing tide. The murmur of voices floats down the stairs, Lia's clear soprano mixed with a man's rich tenor.

I find them in the parlor: Lia on the couch; her visitor in the chair beside it. He is holding her hand. As I enter the room I see her withdraw it. He stands, stretching a bit as if he has been sitting for hours.

"It is good to see you home, Kirin," Lia says softly. "When you did not return for dinner, I grew worried."

I listen to her voice, trying to sense if she feels nervous, or guilty, at my arrival, but all I hear is an uncharacteristic reserve, as if she is dreading having to speak.

I frown and stare at the stranger. His face is familiar to me, but I cannot recall where we have met. Why is he here, so very late? "I ... I had something I needed to take care of."

"And did you? Take care of your errand?" A steely edge creeps in her voice when she asks this, the brittle tone riding beneath her soft words, bracing them like an armature. Her guest glances at her and frowns.

I sigh. I do not want to have this discussion now. Not this late. Not in front of strangers. "Lia, I'm very tired. I—"

"I really should be going as well," the man says with an awkward little bow. "Thank you, I had a lovely evening."

Lia blinks, then seems to remember her manners. She gestures towards the man and says, "Kirin this is Westyn Obarre. You met him at my father's party."

The man's face clicks into place in my memory. "I remember. You're Lia's old friend; the hydromancer."

He nods and gives a deep, formal bow. I do not return it. Sister would surely be shocked at my rudeness, if she were here. I am too weary to care.

"I'll see myself out," Westyn says. He gives Lia a last, concerned look, then moves past me to the entry. The door opens, then closes. All the while, I do not move, or speak. Lia sits on the couch, eyes on the floor.

"Did you have a nice evening?" I ask, surprising myself with the question.

"I ... yes. Westyn and I had the occasion to talk at great length. We did not really have the opportunity to catch up at father's party, so we—"

"You waited up for me," I interrupt. Only after I speak the words do I realize that I hope it is the only reason for her wakefulness at this unusual hour.

"I was worried."

"Worried? About me? You should have just gone to sleep; you know I can handle myself."

Lia looks up at me for the first time. Her blue eyes are bloodshot and shadowed. "Sleep? Gods above and below, I have done too much of that lately, have I not?"

"I don't understand what you—"

"Where were you, Kirin?" she interrupts, her tone imperious and demanding. "What were you doing?"

Her words kindle my own temper, and I feel the bone-deep weariness receding. "Am I a child now, that I must report my comings and goings to you? I thought we'd decided to try and make a life together because we trusted each other."

"Yes! I agree!" she exclaims, leaning forwards, her eyes boring into mine, defying me to look away. "So trust me enough to be honest. Where were you?"

I open my mouth, ready to speak a lie that neither of us will believe, and her words strike me. Trust. We had it once, not long ago. Before we came here. Before the City. What's happening to me?

No. As much as I desire it, I cannot be totally honest with her. Not yet. She will demand I betray Rath to the authorities. The law is clear: necromancy is a crime, and Lia is nothing if not lawful. If Rath is given into their hands, what will become of Napaula?

"I ... was in Low Town," I finally say, settling for a lesser truth.

"Why?"

"Someone there ... she needs my help. An old woman with a very particular condition."

Lia frowns. Whatever she had imagined, this was not it. She squints at me, as if trying to penetrate the unspoken truths my guilty heart contains. Finally, she says, "Have the priests of Shanira seen her? Surely if she is ill, the goddess of healing would be the best—"

I cut her off. "The priests will not help her." I raise my voice, drowning her protest. "I know you and Brother Ato were close, but trust me, Lia: not all of the goddess's followers are as steadfast in their devotions as he. They will not help her."

Lia ponders this for a moment, frowning. "And that's where you were all this time? Helping a sick old woman?"

"Yes," I say, hating myself even as I speak for the lies of omission covered by such a small word. "Her condition is strange, but I believe my healing skills can help her. They may be the only thing that can."

Lia returns her gaze to the floor. A blush tinges her pale skin. "Kirin, I apologize. After last night ... after what was said, when you did not return I worried—"

"Don't worry," I say, moving towards her and sitting on the couch. "My feelings about ... my feelings have not changed. I will keep my promises."

Lia sniffs and I see a tear slide down her cheek. Then she is embracing me, hugging me tight, her face buried in my neck. I return her hug, tears stinging my own eyes. Reflexively, I tense, awaiting my sister's cry of *Liar! Liar!* But she remains silent. Gods, how I wish she would rail at me, that she would scream obscenities and accusations at me, but there is nothing inside but silence.

I pull back, brushing at the tears which threaten to overflow my eyes. I force a wry expression onto my face and say, "Now, what was all that with the handsome hydromancer?"

Now it is Lia's turn to stammer. "I ... I am sorry. I was worried and ... I have nobody I can talk to. So when Westyn came by, I asked him if he would stay and dine—"

"He came here?" I ask. There is something in her face, in the way she will not look at me, that tightens my scalp. "Why?"

"He wanted to bring us a housewarming gift," Lia replies, gesturing towards the dining room. I look over and see a wooden box on the table. "Wine, from his family's vineyard in Astbrooke," she explains. She looks me in the eye, and the troublesome shadow I thought I saw is gone. "I have known him since we were children, Kirin. Did I ... did I do something wrong?"

Stop it, I tell myself. She's done nothing to deserve this.

This farce of mistaken intentions would be amusing, were it not for Lia's expression. She looks, for an instant, very much like a child, wounded and confused. And yet, still, I sense there is something more here. But the hypocrisy of confronting her about it with my own untruths still fresh on my lips prevents me.

"No, love. You've done nothing. Now, I'm very tired, and I'm off to bed," I murmur, giving her a final squeeze. She nods and hugs me back, then looks up at me. Her face is close to mine, and I smell the wine perfuming her warm breath.

"Will you share my room tonight?" she asks.

Desire uncoils in my belly, a sensation reminiscent, yet so very different from, the awakening of the blood magic. Lia's eyes dance with mine, communicating in a language older than speech. Her smile deepens, a coy upturning at the corners of her lips, enticing; seductive. Seeing it reminds me of Napaula, and her secret, mother's smile. Of the look in her ancient eyes as she gazed lovingly down at her eternally unborn son.

The thought of the old woman is cold water over the rising coals of my passion. I look away and step back, out of her embrace. "It's ... it's very late, and I'm too weary to do anything but snore," I say.

"Of course. I'm sorry," Lia replies, frowning. She opens her mouth, perhaps to protest, perhaps to begin the argument again, then closes it and shakes her head. Gods ... to be young again, with youth's appetites. And energy. Was I ever like that? I cannot remember. The realization makes me feel old and decrepit.

"Goodnight, love," I say, giving her a brief peck on the cheek before turning towards the stair.

"Goodnight ... love?" I hear her reply, barely a whisper.

I climb the stairs like a condemned man on the gallows.

* * * *

I sleep late the following morning; it is nearly noon when I force myself from the warm nest of blankets. I do not remember suffering nightmares. Thank the gods and their small comforts; having to endure them on top of the bone-deep fatigue brought on by wrestling the blood magic would have been too much to endure.

As it is, I am sore, every muscle aching. I have not felt this way since the weeks following my flight from home, when I first endured the stresses of living in the wild. I flex my hands, wincing at the soreness in my joints and tendons.

I pad across the icy floorboards, out into the hall, then make water in the small privy. I wash my face and the splash of frigid water brings the world into crisp focus.

I walk back into the hall and see Lia's closed door. Suddenly, the damp chill and the dim, blue glow from the leaden sky outside the windows seem almost too oppressive to bear. I lift the latch, slowly, and it swings open on oiled hinges. The stout bar sits in its holder beside it.

The sight of it starts a warm glow deep in my chest. I slip into her room. I want to look at her, see her sleeping face, untroubled by the burdens I have put on her.

Lia lies on her side, illuminated by the light from her single window. Her freckled cheek rests on a thick, snow-white pillow, surrounded by the dark corona of her hair. Pale strands of copper and tawny gold twine through the chestnut curls, legacy of our time under the open sky, out on the road.

Unlit candles surround the bed, resting in holders and tall brass candelabra. A bouquet of flowers, roses red as heart's blood mixed with other, lesser blooms, pink aster with centers as yellow as the summer sun and pale violet sea lavender, rests in a vase beside the bed. Their fragrance fills the room, making it feel warmer than it is. They must have been very expensive, imported, perhaps, from the Southern lands, where winter's killing hand does not reach.

Despite the cold, she has thrown the blankets off, like she always does. I move to cover her and her sky-blue eyes open. I wonder how long she has been awake. Did she sense me watching her? She turns onto her back and smiles at me, reaching for my hand. She draws it to her face.

She plants a kiss in my palm, soft as down. I feel the tip of her tongue flick out, tracing the delicate lines there. She presses it to the side of her face, her eyes sliding closed, then guides it down the side of her neck to her breasts. I feel her nipple stiffen through the thin fabric of her sleeping gown.

I feel my own flesh responding to her arousal, sending a warm flush through me. I bend and kiss her, gently at first, then with growing urgency. Our lips part, allowing our tongues to dance together, slippery and warm. The musk of sleep still clings to her, is in her mouth, but my rising passion pushes aside such trivial details. All I can sense in this moment is the feeling of her body beneath mine, moving to give my eager hands room to explore, hips already rocking in the oldest of rhythms.

Lia pushes me aside, unexpectedly, and sits. She pulls off her gown, causing her hair to stand up in a crackling, electric cloud, and we both laugh. The cold turns her pale skin to gooseflesh. Her large, dark nipples pucker, standing out proudly. She grasps my face and pulls me to her, kissing me hard. Her teeth worry at my lower lip, biting to the point of pain.

Lia's hands roam down my body, gathering the hem of my own sleeping tunic and pulling it urgently over my head. I wince as her tugging hands catch in my hair. "Lia, gods, slow down," I laugh, breathlessly.

She answers with a kiss, her mouth open and hungry. Her hands fumble at my breasts, pawing at them

until I put my palms atop them, stilling them. I hold them until she twines her fingers in mine.

We tumble back into the snowy sheets, bodies tangled together, knees and thighs intertwined. My earlier pain and soreness is forgotten, washed away by the growing, all-encompassing heat.

Lia kisses my breasts, drawing my aching flesh into her mouth, teasing and biting and sucking, lips and tongue and fingers dancing across my hungry skin. I growl, a sound of pure, animal passion, then whisper her name.

"Lia."

She moves up, until we are face to face. Her heavy breasts press against mine, the soft weight almost unendurably erotic. I feel the first precursor shocks of my ultimate release, washing through me like the echoes of distant thunder. She reaches down, cupping my sex, and strokes me with her thumb. I shiver.

The storm rolls towards me, evoking a tremor in my belly and thighs. I throw back my head, baring my throat to her, and a moment later she covers me with kisses. I gasp as her teeth once more nip at the tender skin; the pain so like pleasure that there is no separating them.

Then she is sliding down me, our skin whispering. She lingers a moment at my breasts, circling each nipple with her tongue before tracing it down my belly. Her saliva leaves behind a deliciously chill trail, a wonderful counterpart for my burning skin.

I open myself for her, completely, totally. Lia slides between my parted thighs and breathes across me. I gasp as her warm breath flows over me, then again as her lips press against me, part me. I rise off the bed, wanting to press her flesh into mine, to join with her completely and totally, fusing our bodies, trapping this sensation in flesh and blood and bone forever.

I say her name, again and again, as the storm rolls over me, casting out the last vestiges of my lingering concern and worry in a peal of thunder.

* * * *

All through breakfast—lunch I suppose, given the hour—Lia has been so happy, chatting away about this and that. It is a feeling I share, a momentary lifting of the dark cloud which has hung above me for the past few days.

"Take me with you," Lia asks. "I am free of my duties for the day, and I would like to watch you work."

The words dispel the warm glow that surrounds me. The weight of the lies I carry within returns, heavier than a stone.

"I wish I could, but I can't," I reply, trying to sound casual. "She's an old woman, and much concerned with her dignity. It was hard enough to convince her to allow me to examine her. If I bring along a young, fresh-faced assistant, then she may become jealous, and difficult. Best I go alone."

The clocktower bells roll out across the City, proclaiming the hour, and I hurry to finish my meal. I told Rath I would meet him at two o'clock, and I have only an hour to get to Low Town.

"Perhaps I can accompany you to her home, then, and wait for you. I am sure I can find something to do."

"It's a very rough neighborhood, dear heart, squalid and ugly. You would not like it. It's dangerous—"

"I do not think I need to fear," she says. "Who would interfere with a mage? We protect the City and the

Armitage; this, and our powers, are well known."

"True enough, but I still don't want you to come."

I busy myself with stacking the dishes, avoiding her gaze. I whisper to myself: Please, if you love me, just let the matter drop. A moment later, she gives a sigh and nods.

"You know your patient best, I suppose," she says. Her voice cannot lie to me, though, and I hear that her own burden of worry has returned. I still the urge to apologize again. The best thing I can do for her now—for us now—is help Napaula. Once she delivers, and I get Rath's answers about the Mor, then I can walk away from him without a backwards glance.

"I wish we could spend the rest of the day together," she says, pouting prettily, the expression almost hiding the concern I see flowering behind her eyes. "It has been such a wonderful morning, and I was hoping that later we could take a bath."

I move to her and wrap my arms around her, burying my face in her fragrant hair. She stands for a moment, stiff and awkward, then I feel her hands slide up my back. She relaxes, leaning into my embrace.

"Tonight. I can't abandon my duties, but I hope to learn what needs to be done after today's examination. I'll be home for dinner, and we can be together afterwards."

I feel her nod. She gives me a squeeze and pulls back. "Kirin, you are sure there is nothing else? It feels like—forgive me for saying so—something else is troubling you."

"It's just ... It's a bit overwhelming. What if I make a mistake? What if I can't figure out how to help Napaula? It worries me. And there are the men of my company, still up on the wall..." I trail off with a worried look to the north.

Oh, very prettily lied, I hear, very softly, barely a whisper. The voice comes from within, from the shadowed corners of my own mind. I freeze, forcing myself to not cock my head, waiting for the voice to say more.

"I can help you!" Lia says, the words tumbling from her lips. "Father can tell me all about your unit; what they have faced in the past few days. He was just telling me the Mor seem to be changing their old raiding tactics along the wall. They seem to be drawing together into bigger groups. I wonder why they are doing that? In the past they always—"

"Lia, sweetheart, I must go," I interrupt. I kiss her briefly and give her hand a squeeze. "But if you can find out about the men, that would be wonderful. And I want to know more about what your father thinks. Perhaps we can talk after our bath," I add with a small grin.

Lia blushes a bit and nods. "I hoped we would be busy with other things afterwards, but perhaps," she says.

My answering smile is pure and unfeigned. There has been much darkness in my short life, so little to look forward to, but Lia is always the one bright star I can rely on. I kiss her once more and head out, swaddling myself in my cloak before trotting down the townhouse steps.

I stride down the street, headed for Rath's house. He said he would send a carriage to collect Napaula in the morning, and would be happy to have her as his guest while we completed our work. As I walk, recollections of my examinations war with more recent events. I wish I did not have to lie to Lia, but soon I will be done with Rath and Napaula. And then I can...

I frown at the thought. What will I do after I have helped the old woman? The defenders of the Armitage have made it clear they do not want me. And I do not find the intrigues of court the least bit attractive. What else is there for me then? The Imperial City is not the wilderness of the north; they do not need the skills of an herbalist and wise woman here.

Lia seems fine with supporting us both, but I know myself: I will not abide it forever. I have been alone for too long, been too independent to settle for the life of a kept woman.

I pause reflexively, awaiting my sister's commentary, but she is still silent. Hearing the whisper earlier, even though it was a denouncement, filled me with momentary hope. Perhaps she will speak to me again, soon. If she can.

The possibility that her silence is caused by some reason other than petulance occurs to me, as it has many times over the past days, but I refuse to consider it. Kirin is a ghost, a specter who resides in the corridors of my mind; she cannot be hurt, or driven out. No trauma should be able to touch her.

And yet, she remains silent. Her actions are not without precedent; she has refused to speak to me in the past. She was silent for months when I lived with the refugees in the mountains and studied the ways of the gods with Brother Ato. But even then, I was always aware of her, watching the world from behind my eyes, judging everything I said and did, albeit in silence. Now ... Now I am not so sure.

I shake my head, pushing aside the worry. I can do nothing about it now. Now I must concentrate on Napaula and on delivering her baby. I will try and let the future work itself out on its own.

I reach the manor house and let myself in through the loosely chained gates. As I cross the courtyard, I see a sweetling, lying in concealment in a patch of shriveled grass. If I did not know what it was, I would think some animal had gone there to die, but the subtle gleam of opaline eyes betrays its true nature. I wonder how many others are even now watching me, held back only by their master's will.

Eddard opens the door at my knock, and favors me with a long, resentful glare as I brush past him. I dump my cloak in his arms, then follow his directions, climbing the broad central stair to the upper floor.

The hallway at the top of the stairs is as dark and as cold as Napaula's squalid apartment building, but at least it is dry and smells only of age and dust. A door stands open midway along its length, and a wedge of golden lamplight spills across the carpet and up the wall.

Inside, Napaula sits on a freshly-made bed, propped on a stack of pillows. Her bony body is wrapped in a pale green dressing gown. She has bathed recently, and her long, bone-white hair spills across her narrow shoulders. Rath sits in a chair beside the bed, stroking her hair with a silver brush.

"There we are, milady," he says with a flourish, reaching towards the nightstand and picking up a hand mirror. "Why, you're as pretty as a fairday maid, you are."

Napaula takes the silvered glass and peers within, a smile stretching her toothless mouth. Her eyes twinkle and, just for a moment, I see the shadow of the girl she must have been. She was lovely, once, I can tell.

The swell of her belly stretches her gown, mute reminder that everything is not as it seems with her. Her swollen hands trace around the dome, a mother's reflex, and I see her lips move as she whispers something to herself.

"Ah, there you are Kirin. Napaula arrived this morning, and Eddard and I have been working hard to make her comfortable. She would like to rest before we begin again, and I've not eaten since early this

morning, so if you don't mind I'd like to dine. You can join me if you like, assuming that you trust Eddard's cooking. I'm sure you're eager to learn what I have to tell you about the Mor, yes?"

I nod. I squeeze the old woman's hand and promise that I will return soon.

Rath lowers the lamp until only the barest flicker of flame lights the room. Together, we exit. I watch Rath's face as he closes the door. His eyes never leave her face. In them is a look of such longing, such devotion, that for a moment I feel uncomfortable, as if I have stumbled across two lovers whispering endearments to one another.

Then the door is closed and Rath is leading me down the hallway, back towards the staircase. The expression of devotion lingers in my mind's eye, vivid as a fever dream and just as troubling. I follow him down the twisting stair.

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CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

Eddard skulks into the dining room, a tarnished silver tureen in his hands. He deposits it on the table in front of me without ceremony. The table, like the rest of the dining room, has been recently, if inexpertly, cleaned. Streaks and whorls of dust can be seen in odd places, as if the job was done in haste.

"Woodstrider stew," Rath explains. The food makes me wary: generally, any animal with six limbs is toxic to the human body. Once, in desperation, I used my magic to absorb the blood of another such animal, a geppar, and the experience nearly killed me. Given my history with Rath, caution seems appropriate.

Rath reads the expression on my face and laughs. "The meat, if correctly prepared, is perfectly safe. Eddard, like many country folk, learned the trick of properly cooking it in lean times. Here in the City, it is considered a delicacy. Not that *you* couldn't eat woodstrider meat raw, if you so desired."

"You like to live dangerously," I say, settling back in my chair.

"Why? Because I dare eat poisoned flesh? As I said, it's perfectly safe—"

"Because if your man made an error, and the meal is indeed tainted, then I shall take my displeasure out on you, first."

The men laugh at this, as if I am joking. I can tell from the flicker of fear in Eddard's eyes that he knows I am not. Rath's own expression betrays nothing save sardonic amusement. Fine. Let him underestimate me if he desires.

Eddard ladles out a generous portion of the stew, then repeats the process for Rath. I lift my fork, spearing a small morsel and raising it to my lips. The meat is dark with a bluish cast, meltingly soft on the tongue, with a taste reminiscent of shellfish—another delicacy I have only experienced once or twice in my life. I swallow and nod my appreciation. Eddard grunts and walks from the room, leaving the serving bowl behind.

"Now then, to business. What do you really know of the Mor?" Rath asks, taking a bite of his own food.

I dab my lips with my napkin while I consider his question. "The Mor are an underground race," I reply after a time. "Not human. They were already here when our ancestors first crossed the sea to their new home, but the settlers did not know it. When they arrived, all they saw was a green and unspoiled land. There were animals, all with six limbs instead of four, but no people. Their own stock did well in their new home, and so they broke down their ships and used them to build the first cities."

"You paid attention to your history lessons as a child. I congratulate you. But what do you know specifically of the Mor?" Rath asks, sipping red wine from a cut-glass goblet. I ignore his condescending tone and press on.

"When the settlers first arrived, they knew nothing of their underground neighbors, for the Mor do not generally travel to the surface. Men first met Mor several years after the first settlements were established. Humanity tried to talk with them, but it proved impossible."

"Do you think they were worried about men encroaching on their territory? Is that the reason for their attacks?" Rath asks.

I shake my head. "I don't think so, but of course I might be wrong. From what I was told, it sounds as if men have never explored deep enough underground to be a danger to their lands. Miners would sometimes run across their tunnels, but would avoid them whenever they could."

Rath leans forward and fixes me with his eyes. "So, what tipped the balance? Why did the Mor suddenly decide to emerge from their underground homes at the end of summer and attack the surface?"

I shrug and sip from my glass. The wine is strong, and I remind myself I still have much work to do, work which will be that much harder if my judgment is impaired. "No one knows. Since the Mor cannot, or will not, talk with us, the cause remained a mystery. All their victims knew was that the Mor seemed to want nothing less than our complete eradication. They destroyed everything: people, houses, entire towns.

"The first attack was devastating, and claimed many. In the end, it was only the use of certain weapons, terrible things the settlers had locked away and forbidden, that stopped the invasion. They drove away the Mor, but only by putting weapons of staggering destruction back into the hands of men. The result was twenty years of oppression, when Latigo Vanamore refused to return those weapons."

"Yes, indeed," Rath agrees. "My own family was raised up in the civil war that followed. The Lans were one of the seven houses which formed the core of the rebellion against Vanamore, and who helped enthrone the first emperor."

"It's comforting to know the Lans are such patriots," I say, assuming he desires my acknowledgement. "In any event, the civil war was a terrible blow, but the forbidden weapons were destroyed, lest they tempt another would-be dictator. Most thought the Mor were broken, and would never return, but some argued that if they were to one day reemerge we should be prepared."

"That person was my own ancestor, Amielia Lan," Rath says.

I sigh, annoyance at his posturing and interruptions. "Is there a point to this history lesson, sir? Other than to reminisce about the wondrous contributions of the Lan family, I mean? If you desire a statue of yourself to be built, I'm sure we could take up a collection—"

"Patience, milady, patience," he says with a laugh. "We are enjoying such a nice, civilized meal, and such wonderful conversation. History can be so fascinating, don't you think? Let's not rush things. Pray, continue."

I clench my teeth on the rude comment threatening to slip past my lips. What does this talk of events long past and his family's accomplishments have to do with the here and now? Wiser men than he have wondered about the Mor's hatred for humanity, and produced no answers. Indeed, he might simply be toying with me, wasting my time, but I do not think so. Rath thinks his wisdom, whatever it is, has merit, I'm sure of it. I moisten my palate with a fresh sip of wine and press on.

"Very well. With the Mor gone, but talk of their possible return in every ear, the decision was made to build the Armitage. The Mor do not live in the south, the heart of our empire and bread basket for all of our people, so the site which was chosen for our bulwark was here, along the Northwatch Cliffs. They used the last of the wonderful machines they had brought with them to build it, consuming all of the fuel that they had brought with them. Doing so allowed them to finish in a score of years something that otherwise would have taken generations."

Rath pushes his plate away, settling back in his chair. His long face is grave, as if he is pondering my words. I take the opportunity to take a bite of my meal.

"Do the Mor's actions make sense to you?" he finally asks.

I frown, then shrug again. I make him wait while I chew and swallow.

"I don't know," I finally allow. "Nor am I sure it matters. The Mor's intentions seem clear every time they

emerge: they kill every human, every last man, woman and even child, and strive to scour every trace of our existence from the face of the world. The reasons why they hate us really don't matter, do they?"

Don't they? I hear, or think I hear. As before, the mind whisper is so soft, barely louder than the sound of silken skirts rustling. I hold my breath, waiting for the voice to say something more, but Rath's words interrupt.

"I think they do. Tell me, Kirin, and be honest: was there never a moment when you faced the Mor where you felt ... *something*?"

His words send chill through me, as if someone is tracing an icicle down my spine. "Felt? I don't understand—"

"Do not lie to me; I can see you do," he presses, his eyes searching my face.

I think back, to the times when I saw the spirits of the dead Mor, once in the mountains and a second time from atop the Armitage. Both times, I sensed an overwhelming depth of emotion radiating from them, as glowing embers radiate heat.

"Yes," I whisper. "But not words. Feelings. Anger and loathing. And fear; above all, fear. But I still don't understand why—"

"What if," Rath interrupts, silencing me with an upraised hand, "the emotions you sensed *were* the Mor's attempt to communicate? What if that's why nobody has ever spoken to them? Not because they do not wish it, but because we cannot understand them?"

The idea is shocking, even as the rightness of it settles over me. Yes, it could be. Their thoughts did almost at times seem to form shapes and concepts.

"It is possible, but it still does not explain the fundamental cause of their fear. It's too intense to be the product of a simple misunderstanding. And how did you know about their thoughts? I have never met anyone who claims to be able to hear them."

Not true, the whisper floats out of my mind. I stop, sure now that it is my sister, trying to speak. The silent declaration finds its mark, however, reminding me that I do know of another.

"Wait, there was someone else. My captain on the wall, the Lord Garrett. After I used the blood magic to heal him, he said he had begun to hear the Mor in his thoughts. It ... it was damaging him. Driving him mad."

Rath ponders this for a moment, then says, "It may have been because he had no way to shut them out. No way to silence the clamor of their emotions."

Sorrow creeps into Rath's tone. "It's possible that because the talent was not natural to him, as it is with others, then it was only partially gifted to him. If such were the case, perhaps the ability to *not* hear was something you failed to pass to him."

"I suppose it's possible, but what you say is guesswork. We can't know; Garrett was clear that he did not want to speak more of it, and I've been dismissed."

"Oh, it's worse than that, I'm afraid. Lord Garrett is dead."

The chill in my spine deepens. I shiver. "What? When?"

"The day before yesterday," Rath replies, the sorrow in his eyes lighting with some new emotion. Something wicked, and amused. "You didn't hear the news?"

"I ... I do not care about the doings of the court," I whisper. I think of Captain Garrett, of the madness and pain carved into his stolid face, and even still I cannot feel that his passing is a good thing. I look up, into Rath's smiling eyes. He is enjoying my reaction. The sight infuriates me, and I feel the blood magic twitch in response to my anger.

"Spare me your games and tell me what happened," I demand, willing it to be still.

Rath shrugs. "As you wish. The way I've heard it told, on the day you were dismissed, the Mor attack continued on, well into the night. The geomancers were able to stabilize the wall, but at the same time that attack was occurring, a second, larger force attacked the Lion's Mouth. The pyromancers defending the main entrance were unable to leave their post and reinforce your unit. Arrows alone are not sufficient to stop the Mor, you know this. Lord Garrett's only choice—"

"Was to send out a sortie," I finish. "To send out a cavalry charge, like the defenders did on the night we arrived. Break up their numbers and scatter them; relieve the pressure on the wall and its defenders."

"Yes," Rath agrees, dropping his eyes as if he regrets the word, but I can still see the dark amusement sparkling within. "Lord Garrett insisted on leading the charge himself. I heard he rode right into them, screaming. Took down at least three of the beasts, including one of their gods-damned shamans, before they pulled him from his horse. They ripped his limbs—"

"I know very well what the Mor do to men when they kill them," I whisper. Visions of Jazen Tor, screaming as his life blood flowed across the Mor's glowing knife and boiled into pink steam; of countless settlements, burned and littered with dismembered arms and legs, flit across my mind's eye. I try to push the visions away. Jazen's death was not my fault. I thought I had come to terms with it months ago.

Yet, I still feel the burning of tears in my eyes as the memory sears across my mind. Inside, I hear the faint echo of my own unvoiced grief. With a grimace, I push the sorrow aside. I will not show such weakness in front of this man.

"He was a brave man," I finally say.

"He wanted to die," Rath replies simply. "Everyone knew he was not the same after ... well..."

"After I used my evil, wicked power on him, you mean. After I saved his life."

Rath holds up his hands. "Peace, Kirin, peace. I merely repeat what I have heard. You saw him, there at the end. What do you think?"

"I think..." I begin, then shake my head. "I think all of this makes no difference. Lord Garrett died a hero's death, defending us all from the Mor, and nothing you or anyone else says will change that. The fact remains that we know nothing of the enemy save your theories."

He shakes his head. "Not theories. Facts."

I sigh and take a drink of wine and attempt to hold my temper. I do not ask again how he knows; he will tell me when he is ready. Rath, for his part, seems to relish the moment.

"I know it is true, Kirin, for one simple reason," Rath continues after a time. He leans forward, as if he is worried he will be overheard, and I feel myself responding, involuntarily moving forward to hear him better.

"I know because I can hear them, too."

* * * *

I sit in the darkened drawing room. An untouched glass of wine is at my elbow. I took it for courtesy's sake, not because I wanted it. Having it close to me is a temptation I do not need.

Thoughts spiral through my mind, chasing one another. Somewhere above, I hear footfalls. Rath, tending to Napaula. He will prepare her for our next examination; little good it will do her. I have seen enough to know all that I do not know. I am convinced I will learn nothing more about her slumbering babe, but I will try again nonetheless. Just in case.

I should be reviewing the old woman's anatomy in my mind, recalling the mnemonics my mistress taught me so many years ago, but Rath's revelation about the Mor, and the surprising conclusions he has drawn from it, dominate my thoughts. Every time I try to steer my thoughts in Napaula's direction, some new consideration, or consequence of what he has told me, pushes them aside.

I rise with a frustrated sigh. I had hoped a few moments alone would grant me the clarity to organize my thoughts, but it appears as if this is not to be. Rath has done an admirable job at distracting me. He could not have been more disruptive if he had tried.

Maybe that was his plan. The man's true motives are as opaque to me as the dark shroud draped over Napaula's baby. But why would he want to make me uneasy? What benefit does he gain from keeping me worried and distracted?

I shrug and move to the stairs. It does not matter; all that does is Napaula. Whatever it takes, I will free the old woman from her unnatural pregnancy, and bring her babe into the world. I do not know if it will survive, or even if it is truly alive at all, but Napaula has told me that she believes it wants this, and is ready to finally come out into the world. I must have faith in her.

I do not believe Rath's devotion to the old woman is what it seems. He must have some ulterior motive, a belief that he will gain from all of this, but I cannot fathom it. All I know is that if he tries to harm her, or the baby, then I pity him, sweetlings or no.

I walk down the hallway to her room, then knock on the open door softly. "Come," Rath replies.

Napaula is sitting up on the tall bed, her wispy, silver hair down on her shoulders. Rath sits next to her, holding her pale hand, speaking to her softly of her bravery and strength.

A bed pan sits on the floor in the corner and I look within, reflexively. The urine inside is dark and evil-smelling. Often with the elderly it is like this, as the body's organs begin to succumb to sickness or simple old age. The everyday poisons generated by the acts of breathing and eating fail to be properly removed, concentrating in the urine, until it is dark, like strong tea.

I do not know how much longer it will be until Napaula's extraordinary strength fails. When she will succumb to the spreading disease which even now continues to grow in her bones and flesh.

"May I have a word before we begin?" I ask Rath.

"Of course. If you will excuse me, milady?" he asks the old woman. She nods as he rises and bows, waiting placidly as we move to the corner of the bedroom.

I gesture towards the bed pan. "Her body is beginning to fail."

"But, she seems so strong. So alert and happy. Shouldn't she be more frail, if she is so close to the end?"

Rath asks.

I shrug. "Her endurance is remarkable, but the signs cannot be denied. I saw it when I looked within her the last time as well: the cancers are everywhere, stealing away her very blood. They are like a *rushalka*, feeding on her blood and life, growing stronger without giving her anything in return. It is a struggle she must eventually lose."

"How long?" he asks, his eyes wide and worried.

"If she were a normal woman I'd say all we could do is make her comfortable for the next few days. To help ease her passing. But it is different with her. She should be barely conscious at this phase in her disease, barely aware of us. Some force aids her; gives her strength."

"The child," he says. It is not a question, but I answer anyway.

"I think so. Perhaps the babe does desire to be born. It is certainly doing everything it can to keep its mother alive."

"Then we should start immediately. You said yourself you weren't sure how much else you could learn about her through examinations. We should perform the operation now. Tonight."

I put my hand on his shoulder, stopping him. "Not tonight. There are still some things I need to try and see first. If I do not visualize all of the blood vessels properly, then we still have a very good chance of killing her with the first incision."

The lie slides off my lips effortlessly, and for just a moment the warm glow of a task well performed suffuses me. Inside, I hear the faint echo of what sounds like a coo of pleasure, there and then gone in an instant.

I know where all of Napaula's vessels are. The blood magic allows me to see them any time I desire; that's not the issue. Truthfully, I do not know if it is simple fear which makes me hesitate, or something else. Dread sits in my belly, a bitter, weighty stone.

Rath opens his mouth, possibly to protest, then a moment later his face falls. He drops his eyes and nods acceptance. "If you think it best, Kirin, then of course this is how we will proceed."

He moves to return to her side, but I stop him. He looks down at my hand on his arm, then back into my face.

"One other thing, before we begin."

"Anything, milady," he replies, a note of annoyance creeping into his silken courtier's voice.

"What you said before, about hearing the Mor," I begin. He nods, waiting.

"You said that you believe the sweetlings are somehow tied to the ability. How?"

Rath cocks his head and a smile plays across his lips. The expression, smug assertion that he has knowledge I lack, grates me. "When your mistress would summon back the souls of the recently departed, what would happen?" he asks in response.

"I watched her with my secret eye while she did so. The souls obeyed the power of command in her voice and went back into their former flesh."

"And?" Rath prompts.

"And the flesh awoke."

"But what were they like?"

I shake my head, frustrated by his line of questioning. "You know both our mistresses' creations were slow, but whole. The entire body would rise, but it was dim-witted and feeble, barely able to do simple chores and tasks."

"Different than the minions we summon," Rath says. "Ours are fast and powerful. Lethal. But not whole. They tear themselves from their former flesh, twisted and horned, as if they take just what they need and nothing more."

"Need for what?" I ask.

"To be a weapon," he replies. His voice is flat and certain, brooking no denial. Still, I shake my head.

"A weapon? I don't understand. I didn't mean for my creations to be ... as they are. It just happened, the first time I called someone back."

I remember that fateful day as if it were yesterday. It was after I killed Marcus and ran away. I was sheltering in a cave. They found me there, while I slept. Highwaymen: Barrett, Mick and Tendy. And Karl, lovely Karl, little more than a boy. Karl, who said he did not want to obey Barrett, but who I know would have raped me on his orders. Karl, whom I killed, with the rest of them, and then brought back using the power in my secret eye.

But what rose was not what I expected; was not one of my mistress's slow, stately companions but rather was small and raw-boned, wearing only half its former flesh, studded with spurs and wicked bone blades. Karl came back as a sweetling, as have all of my attempts at re-creation.

"Let me ask you one further question," Rath demands. I nod. "When your mistress commanded her minions, how did she do so?"

"She spoke, and they obeyed."

"And do you need to speak to your sweetlings to express your wishes?"

I frown. "No. The first time, with Karl, I was hungry. Half-starved, to tell the truth. We were out walking and I heard an animal in the forest: a boar or a deer. I imagined eating it, and Karl went and killed it for me."

"And can you always command them with just a thought?"

"Yes," I reply. "Always. Sometimes I don't even need to be specific; all I need do is want something, as with Karl, and they move to obey."

Rath nods, and takes my hand in his. He squeezes it, as if trying to convince me of his sincerity through the pressure of his touch. "Kirin, think about it: who else do you know who speaks silently to one another? Who converse not in words, but in emotions?"

His words dredge a chill from the depths of my body, an icy shiver which lodges in my spine. I feel the hairs on the back of my neck rising as my scalp tightens in reflexive horror.

He is right. Somehow, Rath and I share the Mor's ability to commune without words, and it is this power that allows us to command our warrior children. It is easy to believe this ability also affects the process of

reanimation, turning our creations into the stunted, terrible avatars of destruction they are.

I pull my hand from his with a shudder of revulsion. No. Not our children. His. Not mine, never again.

I have felt what it is to bring life into the world. Not the twisted parody the sweetlings represent, but actual, true life. Life, which breathes and loves. That shines like starlight in the dark, and that shares its light with others.

The sweetlings are not my children. They are hunger, and darkness. They are pain made flesh, an abomination. I must not ... I will not ... ever forget that essential truth.

Rath sighs and turns away. Perhaps he has seen the determination in my eyes. Perhaps I have disappointed him. I shake my head, forcing the loathing aside. I do not care if he is disappointed; all that matters now is Napaula.

"We're wasting the afternoon, and we've work to do," I say, turning back to where Napaula awaits her latest round of indignities. Her eyes blaze with the love only a mother can feel. Silently, I breathe across the tendrils of crimson magic and they wake, sliding and unfurling inside of me.

"Kirin," he says, before I can return to her side. "Think on this: if our children are indeed weapons that can be used against the Mor—were perhaps even created in the past by knowledge lost to us—then wouldn't that explain their actions? We can turn their own dead against them with just a thought. Men have gone to war for much less; why should the Mor be any different?"

I favor him with a long, lingering stare, forcing him to look into my blackened eyes until he turns away. "If you're right," I say softly, "then you bear as much blame for starting this as I."

"Aye," I hear him whisper, before he moves away. "Perhaps I do. But maybe I can do something to finish it."

Together, we return to Napaula's bedside. One way or another, her baby will be born very soon. I just pray when it happens it is everything she has wished for.

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CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

The scream floats through the air, a blade of sound slicing through the room's hush. I gasp as my concentration wavers, and feel the blood magic surge against my control. On the bed, Napaula moans as it pulses inside her flesh.

I bear down, hard, and struggle to withdraw the power from her aged body, a part of me still alert to the outside world, still listening for another scream. My divided focus makes controlling the ravaging tentacles difficult, and Napaula moans again as I pull with undue force. The power finally relents and allows itself to be returned to my body.

I open my eyes and see the old woman's face, slicked with blood. Twin streams of crimson flow from her nose; I must have ruptured some of her delicate vessels when I pulled too hard, too fast. I open my secret eye and look at her, then sigh when I see her lifeflow is even and steady.

Whoever screamed, it was not Napaula. I only hurt her after the sound distracted me.

I open my mortal eyes and turn to Rath. He is already up, standing at the room's single window. He parts the heavy drapes and peers out into the night. His body is tense, and alert.

"What is it?" I fumble on the bedside table for a clean cloth. As soon as I have it, I wipe at the blood, still oozing over Napaula's withered lips.

"The lads seem to have caught someone out in the courtyard," he replies. His tone is calm, almost amused, but I can sense the undercurrent of anxiety beneath it.

"Send Eddard to—"

"He is already there."

Faintly, I hear Eddard shout. Rath flinches, then pulls the curtain wider, craning forward.

"What is it?" I almost shout. Napaula protests as I wipe her face too hard, accidentally hurting her again.

"Someone else is out there," he says, dropping the curtain and moving towards the door. A moment later he is out of the room, his booted feet echoing down the hall.

"I'm sorry for hurting you," I tell the old woman quickly. "I must see what's happening, but I'll be right back. Stay here."

Napaula nods, pulling the covers over herself. Her eyes are wide, not with fear but with curiosity. I rise and stride out into the hall, closing the door behind me. By the time I reach the stairs, Rath is already outside. His sword's empty scabbard lies on the floor just inside the open front door.

I am still descending, hurrying towards the door when the rasp of steel reaches me. A man shouts, the voice, and language, unfamiliar to me. I dash down the remaining steps, drawing the Ulean steel knife from my boot. The shout changes into a scream, a long, piercing shriek of agony.

I feel my red magic shifting, reacting to the sounds of combat and pain, readying itself. I dash out into the early evening gloom.

The only light comes from the last rays of the setting sun, barely a reflection of red from the clouds overhead. In the courtyard's shadows, I see shapes moving: Rath's sweetlings, moving from their places

of concealment. Dark shapes lie unmoving on the paving stones. Bodies. Two. No, three. Dressed in dark garments of leather and cloth, hoods drawn up over their heads. Masks conceal their lower faces, showing only their eyes.

The sound of steel slithering against steel draws my attention to the gates. I see Rath, and Eddard, standing against four men. Rath's slender dueling blade flickers in a tight figure-eight, moving to slash across his opponent's belly. Black cloth parts with a whisper, but the man must wear leather underneath for he does not stop fighting. Eddard stands beside Rath, his cudgel upraised like a shield, furiously parrying his own foe's short sword.

Rath's creatures surge forward, skittering across the cobblestones like monstrous spiders, claws and bone spurs clicking against the icy ground. The mysterious attackers see them, and call to one another in the same unfamiliar language I heard a moment before.

The creatures flow over the men, horned limbs whiplashing back and forth. I hear cloth and flesh tear as fresh screams rip through the air. Half a dozen sweetlings pile onto the men. The hooded figures struggle to pull back, to retreat to the gate, but now that the sweetlings are amongst them I know they will not stop, will not relent, until their master calls them off or they succumb to their final death.

One of the men impales a sweetling on his short sword, pushing the stout blade into its gaping, fanged mouth. It crunches through leather-hard flesh and bone with a butcher's sound, exploding out the back of the sweetling's head in a spray of gristle. The creature ignores the terrible wound, twisting aside and wrenching the blade from the man's fingers. It is dead; it can feel no pain.

Its attacker is not so fortunate. He screams in mortal agony as the sweetling's clawed talon rakes across his belly. I see the man's intestines come tumbling out, hear them splash against the stones. A moment later, the man drops, writhing.

Soon, it is over. The creatures finish their grisly work, only stopping when the last of the men fall still. One of the sweetlings, the one whose head was impaled, is badly mauled, its limbs shattered by multiple sword strokes. It lies beside the fallen men, struggling to rise.

Rath ends its suffering with a gesture, releasing its soul to the Beyond. Instantly, the sweetling's body begins to crumble, as the force that animates it flies away. The sword transfixing its head clatters to the flagstones as its body crumbles to greasy ash.

The casual way he dismisses it troubles me. Even though I now realize the true, unnatural nature of the creatures, I still cannot look on them without remembering the past. Once, I looked at my sweetlings as a mother would her own children, never as some tool or trifling convenience. No matter what they are, every sweetling has a soul, I cannot forget that.

"Are you all right?" Rath asks me.

I nod. "It was over by the time I got here. Who were they?"

Rath squats beside the man whose belly was ripped open and rummages through his clothes. He finds the man's purse, still tied to his belt. He opens it and pours a meager stream of coins, some silver, mostly copper, into his open palm.

"They weren't assassins," he says. "They would have been paid in gold before coming if they were."

"Spies?" Eddard asks, searching another man's body. He, too, has only a few coins in his purse.

"I believe so. This smells of Count Savard and his Gray Circle. Mercenaries would not have been so well

organized, nor so careful to remove any trace of their identity."

"What were they doing here?" I ask. "And what alerted the sweetlings?"

Rath shrugs. "Maybe one of them tried to come up to the house and peer into one of the windows. Alas, they cannot tell us more. After your unexpected arrival, I ordered the sweetlings to kill anyone trespassing inside the manor walls."

Rath turns towards the body closest to the house, then freezes. He curses softly.

I turn to look, and see in the gathering dark that the body is gone. In its place is a streak of blood, pointing back, towards the rear of the house. Dark spots surround the mark: footprints.

"I need light!" I command, moving to the bloody mark. Eddard dashes into the house, returning a moment later with a lantern.

Even in the dim illumination, the marks tell the story. Two men, booted, were here recently. They helped a third, the wounded man, pulling him to his feet and dragging him off. While they did, they stepped into the pool of blood beneath him. I take the lantern from Eddard's hand and follow the tracks.

Though the blood soon stops, the footprints continue, subtle marks in the thin coating of sleet covering the courtyard. They lead to the rear gate. It hangs open, its bar lying on the ground beside it. Of the men there is no trace, save spatters of blood. The man they spirited away is still alive, still bleeding.

Rath moves up behind me and, seeing the open gate, curses again. "Can you follow them?" he says.

"Probably. But to what end?" I ask. "I have no quarrel with the count or the Gray Circle. What would you have me do when I catch up to them?"

Rath stares at me, then shakes his head. "Kirin, gods woman, don't you realize what this means? Savard knows what is happening here. Or, if he does not, then he will once his men report back. Once they do, he will return, probably at the head of an armed column. They'll take me for the crime of necromancy, and you as well," he says, his voice tight and urgent.

I shrug. "I'm not here for you, Rath. Haven't you learned by now? All I care about is Napaula and the baby. I didn't ask you to raise your foul minions or to protect me. Your crimes are not on my conscience."

Rath shoots me a look of pure hatred before schooling his features into the bored, courtier's mask that is his usual expression.

"Don't think Napaula's age or her sex will spare her from the count's tender examinations," he draws. "He is quite merciless, have no doubt. If the Circle takes her, she will be questioned, too. I doubt she'll last a day in the dungeons. If that happens, the babe will never be born."

I shake my head. "Perhaps. But I will not kill men simply on your say-so. Self-defense is one thing—they were trespassing with motives unknown—but to hunt them down like animals ... No, I will not do it."

Rath sighs. He looks as if he will argue more, but then drops his eyes. He nods. "Very well then, if that is your final word?"

"It is."

Rath's elegant face darkens with fury once more, and for a moment I fear he will allow his passions to

rule him, and will attack me. I tense, willing the blood magic to stand ready. A few seconds later, Rath lets out his breath in a frustrated sigh, and his shoulders drop. I remain vigilant.

"Then we must flee. They will be back soon, this very night. We must go to ground, someplace safe, where Napaula's baby can be born." He turns and hurries back towards the front of the house. I follow. Behind me, I hear Eddard swinging closed the gate, hear the thump as the heavy bar is replaced.

As he passes the bodies of the fallen, Rath pauses, his eyes wide with concentration. A few moments later, the bodies begin to twitch, their feeble motions escalating to thrashing seizures. Soon half a dozen new sweetlings stand in the courtyard, steam rising from their still-warm bodies. All that is left behind are puddles of blood, scraps of flesh, and small mounds of shredded clothing.

Rath sways as the summoning takes its toll. I do not move to assist him. Watching the process evokes a sensation of terrible sadness, and longing, in my breast. Gods, was there really a time when I could call forth such things with unequivocal love in my heart?

Mentally, Rath orders the creatures to take up new positions, stationing them at the base of the walls, where the shadows are thickest. When satisfied, he turns for the manor and strides inside.

I follow, unsure of what he intends. Rath moves to the small study beside the kitchen. At the desk, he draws out a small scrap of parchment and a pen, then scribbles something upon it. He thrusts the note in my direction.

"Go. I'll take Napaula to this address. It should be safe enough for a few days. Wait until tomorrow to meet us, if you can; Savard's spies might not have seen you, or if they did they might not have recognized you, but be wary. They might come for you next. If they do, do not let them get that." He gestures to the note.

I nod and tuck the parchment inside my boot. "What about Napaula?"

"She seems in no immediate danger of going into labor," Rath replies dryly.

I nod again and hurry out into the newly-minted darkness.

* * * *

The streets outside the manor's walls are dark, the lamps unlit. The blackness could hide an army of spies. Or assassins.

It would help if I knew why the men had come, but of course neither dead men nor sweetlings can be questioned. I wish Rath's servants had left at least one alive; I could have extracted the truth with the blood magic.

I am not far from the manor when I smell something burning. Some instinct draws my eye back the way I came. Behind me, I see a column of smoke, lit from below by orange flames.

I sprint back, telling myself it must be some other house, but inside I know. I turn the corner onto Rath's street and emerge into chaos.

A swelling crowd flows towards the source of the growing disturbance. The excited buzz of conversation fills the air, rising to meet the pillar of dense, black smoke. I hurry towards Rath's house.

By the time I arrive the upper floors are already engulfed. The blaze spreads with alarming speed, sending a column of sparks and black smoke whirling up into the winter night. I head for the gates, and hands reach out to stop me.

"Are ye daft, woman? Y'can't go in there!" a red-faced man in a heavy black coat yells. I turn to confront him, to demand he release me, and see his shock at the sight of my black eyes. He steps back, sketching the sign of Loran Lightbringer before scurrying away.

A woman screams as the upper windows explode in bursts of flame and shards of glass. As I watch, struggling against the hands that restrain me, the fire begins in the lower floors, catching in the curtains and filling the windows with bright orange light.

Rath must have escaped. Must have gotten Napaula out before the fire completely engulfed the upper floors, I tell myself. He *must* have.

I hear the brassy chime of bells floating above the sound of galloping hooves. The crowd parts, making room for a fire wagon. A massive brass tank is set atop it. The flames gleam from its polished sides. A team of four horses, hugely muscled animals with tree-trunk legs and hooves as large as serving platters, pulls it along the uneven cobbles.

Men run behind, most dressed in heavy oilcloth coats. Beside the driver, I spy a woman dressed in the embroidered robes of a hydromancer.

I turn away and slip into the crowd. Containing the blaze will demand all of the fire team's attention for the time being, but eventually they will begin to ask questions of the crowd. I curse myself for making a scene; few would have noticed me in the dark and smoke, but the man who tried to stop me will remember my black eyes and wild, white hair.

I pull my hood higher and slip into the crowd, just another figure in a sea of others, fleeing the destruction behind me.

It takes me less time to get home than it did the night before. I am not weary tonight, and fear puts speed into my step. As I hurry north, back towards home, I try to not look conspicuous, resisting the urge to look back over my shoulder every five steps. The smell of smoke clings to me like an accusation.

Even though I am hurrying, it is an agonizingly long time until I see the cheery lights of my street ahead. Seeing them, I break into a trot.

Just ahead, a figure steps out from the shelter of a tree. Silhouetted by the streetlamps behind him, I cannot make out his hooded features. I stop, coming up on the balls of my feet, my hand dropping to the hilt of the Mor knife.

I don't hear the second man until he is upon me. I hear the scrape of his booted feet an instant before he crashes into my side, his shoulder down. The heavy stone blade flies from my suddenly nerveless hand.

We tumble sideways, into the street. I land painfully on the cobblestones, my assailant atop me, driving the breath from my lungs. My head strikes the ground in an explosion of stars.

"Tie her hands!" the man from behind the tree whispers urgently.

I open my mouth to scream. The house is close, maybe Lia will hear. The man atop me drives a knee savagely into the small of my back, and the indrawn breath whistles uselessly out. The pain is puissant and all-encompassing, robbing my limbs of strength and making my head spin. Dimly, I feel my wrists pulled sharply back, feel a noose of rough cord slipped over my hands, cinching tightly closed.

The two men grab me under the arms and lift me to my feet. As soon as I am up, I feel a knife pressing against my throbbing back, jabbing me sharply.

"Let's not make a scene," one of them whispers. "The Count Savard requests the pleasure of your company, and we're here to see you safely to him."

I stagger forward, blood in my mouth. The men push me towards a carriage waiting on the next street. I allow myself to be led, struggling to draw a proper breath. They clutch me at either side, not looking into my face. I will only have one chance; I must not waste it.

"I'm going to be sick," I mumble miserably, staggering to a stop and bending over. The men keep pulling my arms, dragging my toes across the stones. I heave, as if I am about to spew and, for an instant, instinct takes over: I feel them shift away, just a little, dropping my weight.

I raise my boot and stomp down with all my strength on the man to my right's foot. He hisses in pain and steps back, dropping his hand. I spin to the left, raising my eyes to the other man's.

"Get back!" I cry, the power of command flowing through the words. His jaw drops, then he steps back, woodenly.

The pause is all I need. I kick upwards, into the juncture of his thighs. Even through the thick leather of my boot, the solidity of his pubic bone jabs painfully into the top of my foot. The man reels back, gagging and cradling his groin.

I turn back towards the other man, just in time to see his arm descending. The lamplight glitters along the edge of his blade. I throw myself towards him, trying to get inside the strike, and feel the knife bury itself in my shoulder. The blade grates along bone, and I scream in agony.

Then we tumble back for the second time in as many minutes. Even as we fall, I feel the man pull out the knife and stab me again, this time in the side, below the ribs.

I am on top as we fall to the stones. I try to crush his groin with my knee, but he is ready for the trick, his legs pressed tightly together around my leg. With my hands bound behind me, I cannot get the proper leverage to break free. The fire in my wounded back and side steals away my breath.

I feel his arm come around. Ice cold steel, sharp as a razor, kisses my throat. I freeze.

"Get off, *aschula*, or so help me I'll slit your whore's throat, orders or no," he pants. His eyes, only inches away, glare into mine. The knife presses down, and I feel the flesh beneath it part, feel the first trickle of my blood.

I do not want to hurt these men, but I have no choice. Napaula needs me.

"Kiss me," I whisper, threading the iron tendrils of my will through the words. I feel him jerk as the command takes hold, feel him resisting. I flinch as his struggles jerk the knife, deepening the wound in my neck. I refuse to move, lest I break eye contact and sever the connection between us.

Then he leans forward, pressing his lips to mine. The contact, flesh to flesh, is all I need. I open my mouth wide and he responds.

The blood magic comes ravaging up my throat, spilling past my tongue and teeth, driving inside his body. I command it to dig deeply, all the way into his heart. The man moans into my mouth, a second before his life blood comes rushing up. The knife falls from his nerveless fingers.

A burst of strength floods my limbs as his stolen vitality fills me. I jerk my arms and feel the rough cord part like twine. I reach up and cup his face in my hands, pulling his mouth against mine. Dimly, I feel him shuddering beneath me, his struggles growing more and more feeble, until he is finally still.

I break away, pulling my mouth from his. The taste of blood, heavy and metallic, fills my mouth. My shoulder and side tingle, like ants marching across my flesh. I do not need to look to sense that the man's stolen life has made my wounds whole again.

I hear a moan and look up from the corpse. The second man crouches, still cradling his injured privates. His eyes are wide with horror as he looks at the shriveled body of his partner.

Inside, the blood magic capers and cavorts, laughing at his fear. I feel my lips twist to mirror its black humor. My black eyes find his and I whisper: "*Run.*"

My attacker needs no encouragement, does not require the power of command. He turns and stumbles up the street, sobbing in terror.

I force my legs to remain still. Every fiber of me demands that I pursue my prey. That I run him to ground and snuff out his life. Inside, the blood magic cries out in frustration. It has been so long since it was allowed to do what it does best: to rip; to tear; to yank the life from a body by its bloody roots.

I look down at the dead man at my feet and try to ignore the magic's frustrated clamor. The corpse is wizened and shriveled, smaller than an old man's, the eyes sunken to black pits. Blood, black in the lamplight, slicks the figure's face. The stench of shit and fresh blood rises from it in a choking cloud.

I turn aside as the realization of what I have done penetrates my bloodlust. The ground tilts, and I drop to my knees, my eyes bulging with horror. The man's sunken eyes glare at me, full of undying accusation. Oh, gods, no. Please, not again. Not again.

After a time, I do not know how long, the stones' cold penetrates my numb lethargy. I cannot be seen here, only a few doors from Lia's house. Just thinking of the immensity of the scandal makes my head spin.

No. I must hide the evidence of my crime, just until I can deal with Napaula. Once she is safe, once the babe is born, to live or die I know not, I will give myself over to Count Savard's mercy. Later, but not now.

I stagger to my feet, then kneel beside the body. It is light, no heavier than a child's. I feel the bones, sharp beneath the shrunken parchment of its skin. I shudder and carry it to my house, laying it in the deep shadows beside the rear stairs.

I must leave. Now. Before my would-be kidnapper can report to the master of the Gray Circle. Before the hounds are sent out to find me. Before they can come and question Lia, dearest, innocent Lia.

They will tell her what I did. What Rath is still doing. They will watch with hard, uncaring eyes as Lia cries for me, and for herself. I should not linger; I should be far away from here, now.

I find myself at the front door, opening it onto warmth and light and the enticing smell of cooking food. Even though every instinct cries out for me to run, I know I cannot let them be the ones to tell her. After everything we have endured together, I owe her that much.

I step into the house and close the heavy door behind me.

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CHAPTER NINETEEN

I watch the house from across the darkened street. It is a ruin: roof half gone, half-shuttered, glassless windows staring out, dark and empty as a skull's eye sockets. Graffiti mar the dingy gray walls, the sigils of competing gangs unreadable in the dim light.

There are no streetlights here, not even the widely-spaced, often dark lamps I saw on Rath's street. The City's ever-present glow reflects wanly from the scuttling clouds overhead, filling the street with a vague, orange luminance. I look down at the scrap of parchment in my hand, but of course it is too dark to read. I shrug and stuff it back into my boot.

I hear a soft footfall behind me, and a woman's frustrated sigh. I do not turn; I know who it is, and smile to hear it.

Lia shifts again, craning her head to see better, as if this can help her eyes pierce the gloom. She blends into the squalid avenue well, her dark gray cloak, my traveling spare, draped over her trail-worn traveling clothes. I smile wider to see her in them.

As pretty as she is in silk and satin, Lia will always be loveliest to me like this, dressed in the handed-down homespuns the refugees gave her so many months ago. They remind me of simpler times, when it was just her and me against the Mor. Time, it seems, softens the edges of even the most jagged-edged recollections.

"Are you sure this is the address?" Lia says for the third time. As before, I nod, keeping my ears and eyes sharp, scanning up and down the street.

"This does not seem right," she whispers. "That house is no fit place to birth a child. It does not even have a proper roof."

"I don't understand it either," I reply. It is obvious she will not relent until I answer her.

She deserves my acknowledgement, gods know. Just two hours ago, I walked into our home, blood on my clothes, and told her everything. Of Napaula, and Rath. Of his sweetlings. Of my failure, and my use of the blood magic out in the street.

She sat at the table as I spoke, elegant in a clinging, low-cut gown I had never seen before, something new she had purchased specially for the occasion. The smells of roast lamb and onion soup were redolent in the quiet air. Rich food, the opening act of what she hoped would be a long, romantic evening.

When I was done, she sat for several long moments, staring into the fire crackling in the hearth. Flickers of lightning played in her azure eyes. I waited, quietly, patiently, resisting the urge to embellish and explain, all too aware that there was no justification for what I had done, not even self-defense. Instead, I sat, silent, awaiting her judgment.

After a time she sighed and lifted her hand, removing the jeweled sticks securing her hair. The chestnut curls came tumbling down, spilling over her freckled shoulders. With a deft twist she pulled it back, gathering it into the horse's-tail she used when she was working. Or traveling.

"If there is even a chance that the old woman you spoke of can deliver her child, then we have no choice but to help her," she said, rising and draining her wine cup.

"Thank you," I replied, unable to say more. "I should go. Now. Tonight. Savard's men may come back, and I'd like you well gone by then. Perhaps your father could—"

She held up her hand, silencing me. Her eyes were hard and uncompromising, lit from within by threads of lambent electricity. Fury radiated from her like heat from a stove. "I said *we* must help her. I am going with you."

The carriage driver raised an eyebrow at the sight of us: high-bred ladies dressed in traveling clothes and scout's leathers, cloaks at our backs and knives worn openly at our hips, but said nothing. Lia did not speak to me once during the trip back to Low Town. We rode in silence. All the way there, I wanted to say something, anything, but the words dried up in my throat. What was there to say, really?

Watching her as we rode—the tight line of her jaw; her flashing, uncompromising eyes; even the way she always moved to keep as much distance as possible between us in the carriage—a bitter sadness welled up in me. I could feel something unique and profound withering, fading like a flower too long cut. I wanted to apologize, or to explain, but the words would not come. I ordered the driver to drop us several blocks from the address Rath had given me, and we walked the remaining distance, alert for any signs of ambush.

Despite her obvious disappointment in the circumstances of coming here, I am grateful to have her at my side. She is of privileged birth, daughter of Argus Cho, and is doubtless known to the Gray Circle. Plus her personal power is formidable, and equally well known. Only a fool would dare raise their hand to an aeromancer of her skill.

Watching the house, a new thought occurs to me. What if Lia's status with the court no longer matters? What if, in joining me, she has forfeited her rights and benefits as a member of the mage class? After all, I am a murderer; I killed a member of the Gray Circle. What might Savard do in retaliation for such a thing?

Suddenly, the tightly-packed houses seem much more ominous. Every shadowed window, every doorway, may hide a black-clad archer. Every chimney may shelter an assassin who, even now, draws an arrow to his cheek. As powerful as Lia is, she is no match for a sniper's arrow sent from a place of concealment.

"Come on," I say, making my decision. I will not learn anything more by staring at the house's blank brick and plaster walls. Lia nods and follows.

We cross the street and pick our way through the rubbish littering the house's front steps, papers and broken roof tiles and a single, filth-encrusted bottle. The front door was recently secured with a stout chain and a lock. Even in the gloom, I can see the heavy, rusted eye bolts screwed into the planks and the place where the lock has rubbed away the door's peeling paint. Now the door stands unsecured, the chain nowhere to be seen. I push the latch and the door creaks open under my shoulder, the noise echoing from the stained plaster walls.

I feel Lia, just behind me, and turn to see if she is ready. She nods. We slip inside.

The foyer smells of damp and cold and old smoke. The sky glow does not penetrate the inside of the house, and I must stop and light my small lantern. I raise it, gambling that if there are archers, they will not have a clear shot through the splintered shutters.

Plaster peels from the walls, exposing lathing. The floor was lovely once, a mosaic of wooden parquet, now warped and buckled. It looks dangerous, the wood splintered and cracked. One could easily fall through a weak spot.

I set my bow beside the door, then un-sling the quiver of barbed arrows slanting across my back. They will only hinder me in the close confines of the building.

Doorways lead off from the entrance hall. The rooms beyond are invisible in the dark. I hear the skittering of rats, moving across the dusty floors, crawling inside the walls. There is a hole in the ceiling, five feet across, and through it I can barely make out the room above us.

An odor floats above the miasma of smoke and wet plaster, a sweet smell, like bodies rotting on a hangman's gallows. It is faint, but my alert nose detects the scent instantly.

"Kirin, where—" Lia begins. I silence her with an upraised hand. She smells it too; I see the lightning in her eyes grow brighter, flickering faster now as she gathers her power about her.

A new sound intrudes on the house's hushed silence: soft scrapings and footfalls. Floor boards creak as something heavy shifts and moves in the black rooms. I hear the *skrtch* of an object scraping across the floor, something hard, like claws or spines. The noises are all around us, are above us as well.

I crouch and rest the lantern on the floor, not bothering with my knife; it is useless against them. My eyes move back and forth, alert for any flicker of movement.

I hear Lia, whispering in the language of the air elementals. I pray she does not need to call upon them; I do not think the dilapidated building could withstand even a single stroke of her power. I do not want to die here, buried alive by the house's collapse.

The first sweetling steps into the light, emerging from the shadows of a side room. The creature was once one of the attackers from Rath's manor; I recognize the dusky skin and black eyes, empty now, filmed over with a layer of milky opal. Once, he was the man Rath cut with his sword, before the sweetlings spilled his guts over the frozen ground, now reanimated and sent to do its master's bidding.

Only the face is recognizable; the rest is nightmare. The body that carries it is hunched and twisted. The legs are short and powerful, bent back like a bird's, ending in three-toed, clawed talons beneath a swollen chest as big as a barrel. The leathery flesh is missing in several places, exposing the wet red of tendon and the gleaming yellowish white of bone. In place of hands, the thing has a trio of wicked bone spurs, each longer than a carving knife, jagged and cruelly barbed. It flexes them slowly, as if it relishes the thought of bathing them in our blood.

"Steady," I whisper. "It would have attacked by now if it was going to."

A second sweetling appears at the lip of the hole above, peering down at us with its ruined face. Then a third and a fourth emerge from their hiding places, moving towards us.

"I'm here for your master," I say, threading the power of command through the words. I do not know if it will do anything; the creatures are not alive. The will that drives them is not their own.

They pause for a moment at the sound of my voice, hesitating. The moment stretches, the creatures frozen in place. I feel Lia shifting behind me.

"What is happening?" she hisses.

"I don't know. But be ready in case they come after us. I'll—"

The sweetlings move, tightening the ring of malice surrounding us. Lia and I go back-to-back, the move instinctual. The sweetling above drops through the hole and lands heavily on the dusty parquet floor, rolling back to its feet with clumsy grace.

"Kirin," Lia says, begging me to give her the signal to attack. She sounds very young, very scared, and I curse myself silently for allowing her to come.

The creatures on one side of us, the side leading deeper into the house, move aside, opening a space in the ring. Their intention is clear: *Walk this way.*

"Come on," I whisper, picking up the lantern. "It seems we're to have an audience after all."

As we walk deeper into the house, the sweetlings move to bracket us, steering us towards the rearmost rooms. Soon we come to an open door. The things stop, at either side. Behind the open door I see stairs, leading down.

I look at Lia and shrug, then begin my descent. They creak ominously, but hold. After several steps, the stairs turn back on themselves, changing from warped wood to worn stone. Out of the wind, the air is warmer, the reek of death more pronounced. I reach back and my groping fingers find Lia's hand. She clasps it, painfully tight. The stairs abruptly end and I stumble.

The lantern's glow does little to illuminate the open expanse of the basement. The smell is overpowering, pressing against my face like fetid cobwebs. The taste is galling in the back of my throat. All around I hear the sounds of dripping water and shuffling bodies. The edges of the room seethe with half-glimpsed movement. How many sweetlings surround us? A dozen? Two? More?

Lia gives a tiny scream as one of our guides nudges her forward, pushing her into my back. "Do not touch me!" she calls out. Her eyes flash like distant heat lightning.

Hand in hand, we make our way across the packed-earth floor. My feet push aside heaps of clumped dirt and other refuse. Sweetlings shamble towards us, every one a fresh horror, then brush past. Every time this happens, I must resist the urge to flinch away.

I spy a new fire, glowing from an opening in the far wall. I hear a man's measured footsteps, boot leather ringing against stone. As I approach, my lantern shows me the ragged edges of a broken-down wall. Its stones are scattered across the floor, lying in untidy piles at either side of the narrow opening.

Rath, torch in hand, emerges from the passage behind the wall. I hear Lia gasp as the additional light reveals the creatures all around us, three dozen at least, a seething, shifting mass of horned limbs and weeping, broken flesh. Several can barely move, their tissues dried and stretched. They are weeks, if not months old, desiccated by time, while others, like the ones who met us above, are still fresh, still spry.

"What happened?" Rath asks.

"The Gray Circle ambushed me outside of my house," I explain. "I couldn't wait until tomorrow."

"What's she doing here?"

"They would have taken her too. I couldn't ask her to—"

"Where Kirin goes, I go," Lia interrupts. She gives my hand a final squeeze and drops it, stepping up beside me. Despite the horrible forms all around me, despite the cold and the stink, and the oppressive gloom, I smile.

"I want to see this old woman. Now," Lia continues, her tone clipped and regal. She holds herself like a queen, haughty and cold, brooking no refusal.

Rath stares at her for a moment, his eyebrows raised, then looks at me. I smile again and shrug. Finally, he nods. "But of course, Lady Cho. Please, forgive my shameful manners. If you'd be so kind as to step this way?" He gestures towards the hole in the wall behind him.

Lia steps forward, outwardly calm and collected, but I can still see the flicker of lightning behind her eyes. I know her well enough to read her fear and fury. I follow, through the ragged hole, and into a low-ceilinged tunnel.

Rath takes the lead, lighting our way. The passage behind the wall is narrow, barely wider than my outstretched arms, lined with irregular stone bricks. The arched ceiling curves just above my head; Rath must crouch slightly, lest he scrape against it. The odor of rotting things is less in the tunnel; I can barely smell it over the scent of ancient dust.

"What is this place?" I ask.

"It's the house's private catacomb. The City's wealthier families used them to bury their dead, before the practice was outlawed," Rath explains. Even as he does, we emerge into a round chamber, nearly forty feet across. Brick-lined alcoves line the walls, ceiling to floor, each the resting place of a skeletal body. The floor is crowded with a dozen marble sarcophagi, their lids adorned with carved likenesses of, I assume, the person resting within.

"Outlawed?" I ask.

"The priests decided it was ungodly for common people to sleep above the bodies of their dead relatives," Rath answers. "Instead, they commanded that everyone, rich or poor, beggar or courtier, be interred in the necropolis on the western edge of the city. Very pious, I'm sure, but unnecessary. In reality, what they really wanted was to keep watch over the dead. To oversee and assure their final sleep."

I can see the wisdom of it. In a world where people like Rath and I can commune with the spirits of the dead, and command them to do our bidding, it is only natural that the priests would desire control over such power.

"So what about these bodies? This catacomb?" I ask, following him and Lia through the coffins.

"Bodies already at rest were allowed to continue their eternal sleep. But the passages connecting the various catacombs were gated, or walled up, sealing them from one another. That was over two hundred years ago. Now, many people—upright, law-abiding types anyway—don't even remember these tunnels even exist."

We pass a second broken wall and enter a new passage. Rath reaches a crossing, and turns right. The new tunnel is wider, nearly eight feet across and twice that high. "A main thoroughfare," Rath explains. "This runs along the path of the street above."

We keep walking, passing stout, rusted iron gates and bricked-over doorways. Some have words scratched beside them in charcoal or with a stone: addresses, or cryptic symbols. Some are arrows, pointing in differing directions, personal way-markers for long-lost explorers.

The passages are not completely abandoned; someone uses them, if only occasionally, but it is impossible to judge how long it has been since anyone was last here.

We pass a broken doorway and I spy movement. I slow, my hand on my knife, and in the chancy torchlight spy a sweetling, crammed into the opening. It stares out of the hole at me with weeping, opal eyes, its wide, fanged mouth twisted in a permanent snarl.

"Pity the burglar or grave robber who comes this way, eh?" Rath says with a laugh. I nod, and see Lia's face twist in revulsion at Rath's good humor. She knows what the sweetlings are capable of.

Rath passes three more crossings, then turns left at the fourth. The passage narrows once more. After a time, he stops at one of the heavy iron gates. He fishes a neck chain out from beneath his tunic and draws it over his head. A key dangles from the golden links.

The lock, despite its aged appearance, opens with a smooth, oiled click. He removes the chain and pulls wide the gate, inviting us to enter. Lia walks through, eyeing the gate nervously. When we are through, Rath closes and locks it behind us.

Just past the gate is a thick, wooden door. It smells of fresh-cut wood. Rath pushes, and it swings open on smoothly-oiled hinges. Light spills into the passage.

The room beyond is another crypt, even larger than the one we passed before. Candles have been placed on the edges of the niches in the walls, bathing the room in light. The bodies lying in the shelf-like depressions have been reduced to dusty skeletons.

Unlike the other crypt, this one is open, uncluttered by biers or sarcophagi, with a floor of mosaic. Several heavy grates bar dark openings in the walls. The picture on the floor is done in the old style of repeated, entwined shapes, stars and arabesques, their radii coming together in hexagonal junctures. It is a thing of beauty, reminiscent of the decorative rugs which have always been the heirlooms of the wealthiest of families, locked away in the darkness and left to mold, like everything else here.

In the room's center stands a tall, padded table, covered in a spotless white sheet. Unlit candelabra stand beside it. A couch and some chairs have been placed against the walls. Napaula lies on the couch, smiling up at us.

"Welcome to my family's place of rest and memorial," Rath says, bowing us in as if inviting us into his sitting room.

Realization dawns in me. "We're beneath the house. This is why you set the fire: to block the way down."

"Excellent. I cannot tell you how enticing a woman of such beauty and such intelligence is to me, Kirin."

"What if they realize what you have done and decide to dig you out?" Lia asks, looking around. Her eyes find Napaula's reclining form, and go wide.

Rath shrugs. "We'll hear any such effort hours before they can clear the stair. If we do, we retreat into the catacombs. If someone tries finding this place by backtracking through the tunnels, the lads will serve to slow them long enough for us to make our escape. But as few remember the underground ways any more, I think it unlikely that—"

"The geomancers remember," Lia interrupts. "Who do you think made these passages? If they learn you are here, they will summon an earth elemental, one which can have the debris blocking the stairs cleared in minutes."

"Then we shall have to hope that will not happen," he replies with an easy smile.

He presses on, ignoring Lia's interruption. "I've taken the liberty of ... modifying some of the tunnels leading away from here. It should make any pursuit problematic at best."

"You seem to have thought of everything," I grudgingly admit. "Except for one thing." I point to Napaula.

She has lifted herself and sits on the edge of the couch. As she shifts, she winces and cradles her belly. I remember the expression well from my sister's pregnancy, as the baby pressed against her organs and bladder. She needs to relieve herself.

"*Mi latdadora*," the old woman whispers.

Rath nods. "Eddard made arrangements for our comfort back in the woman's crypt," he says, gesturing towards one of the iron gates. "All things considered, I don't think my ancestors will mind having to deal with a little stink for a few days."

"I'll do it," I tell Lia, and take the old woman's arm. I pick up a candle holder and lead her through the indicated gate. Beyond, I find a small, round room. Marble plaques are set into the walls, each bearing a woman's name, and a set of dates. Some are adorned with inscriptions, snatches of poetry or declarations of sorrow or love. There is a covered bucket in the corner, and when she lifts the lid I see it is half filled with sand.

I look away as Napaula squats and does her business, supporting her weight on my bent arm. The smell is unpleasant but bearable. "Where is your serving man?" I call out, remembering Lia does not know who Eddard is.

"Running an errand for me," Rath replies. "He should have returned by now, actually."

When she is done, I help the old woman back to the couch. Lia gives her a worried look. She cannot take her eyes off her distended belly as she settles back, breathing hard, as if she has run for miles, not walked to the other room and back.

Rath examines the tray of instruments beside Napaula's padded table. I step beside him and look at the row of gleaming tools, delicate, razor-edged knives and hooked retractors. They are much finer than my mistress's instruments, forged from some shining metal, gleaming like polished silver. I pick up a blade and see minute writing engraved on the side of the leaf-shaped blade.

"Those belonged to my ancestor. He was a surgeon, the ship's doctor for the long journey across the sea. Family lore says he was brilliant healer, as befitted such a lofty position in the crew. But, if the stories are to be believed, he was also a cold man, interested more in solving puzzles and diagnosing ailments than in the people who were saved as a result."

"It must have been lonely for him," I say, without thinking, my attention still on the priceless instruments arrayed before me.

"Perhaps, but I like to think he preferred solitude. 'Some insights,' he wrote, 'can only be made following careful, reasoned contemplation.' Too much interaction with other people would have been a distraction to a man like him."

I look up from the tray, over to Lia. She has pulled a chair up to Napaula's side and has taken her hand. She bends her head and whispers something to the old woman. I see her toothless mouth stretch in a warm, answering smile, and she pats Lia's hand.

"It still sounds like a lonely life to me. What's the point of life if you must live it alone?"

Rath snorts, dismissing this idea. He takes the scalpel from my hand and holds it to the candlelight, allowing the glow to play along the edge. Satisfied, he nods and replaces it in its place beside the others.

On the table, Napaula's breathing quickens further. The breaths turn to gasps. Napaula begins to cough, the racking spasms shaking her thin chest. She raises a cloth to her lips, and when she takes it away, I see it is flecked with red.

Alarmed, I open my secret eye and gaze at the tapestry of her life. She is fading, her lifelight succumbing to the black parasites infecting her body. Once again, I am shocked that she is even alive at all.

"Rath," I say, trying to sound calm. "We have to deliver the child. Now."

"Out of the question. I need Eddard to hold the instruments. Mistress Cho has no idea—"

A new series of coughs twists the old woman's body. When they finally pass, blood sparkles, shocking and red in the candlelight, on her chin.

"If we are to do this, it must be now. Rath, please..."

The nobleman chews his lip, glancing between Lia and me. I can understand his hesitation: the fear of the unknown can be crippling. But her life is fading before my eyes. We cannot afford to wait. She cannot afford it.

"All right, we do this," he finally says, nodding. The indecision in his eyes fades, replaced with a steely resolve.

I nod and, together, we turn to Napaula. Despite her bone-deep weariness, her smile lights the room. Surrounded by death, we prepare to welcome new life.

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CHAPTER TWENTY

Rath steps into the circle of golden light. A box of black lacquered wood rests in his soft, long-fingered hands. He sets it on the table beside the bed, and opens the lid.

The light from a hundred candles sparkles against its contents: a pair of slender glass tubes, resting in mirror-bright silver holders. Rath lifts one of the devices and screws a needle to its tip.

I lean forward, the better to see the syringe. Like all of Rath's instruments, it is ancient and precise, the product of a long-lost art. Before today, only in books had I ever seen such things. He smiles to see my face, and places the device in my hand.

While I inspect the syringe, marveling at its hair-fine tip and flawless, paper-thin glass walls, Rath fits a needle to the second tip. That job done, he draws a clear glass bottle from the box's red velvet interior and carefully removes the cork from its throat.

"This will put her to sleep while we work," he explains. "The shock of the incision's pain would probably kill her, otherwise. But I can only guess the amount. My books say nothing about a woman of Napaula's advanced age or ... condition. If I give her too little, she will wake in the middle of the procedure. Too much, and the medicine will stop her heart. It will be up to you to watch her from within, and keep that from happening. Do you understand?"

I nod. With the sight granted me by the blood magic, combined with my newfound experience with poisons, I should be able to see what the elixir is doing to her. Controlling it, however, is another story.

What if Rath's medicine works differently than the amnunthol extract, and I do not know what to do? What if she is allergic to the chemicals in the vial? Such reactions, while rare, were cautioned against many times in my mistress's books. What if she is simply too old, and frail, to survive the stress of the cutting that is to come?

"Where did you find such medicine?" Lia asks, watching the procedure from the other side of the bed.

"My books contain very precise recipes," he explains. "Our ancestors possessed such wonderful knowledge, and were skilled in the making of things we can only dream of. They brought extensive supplies with them when they settled here, but were all too aware that one day, their stores would run out, or lose their potency, so they documented how to make more.

"Of course, much of what they could do cannot be recreated now, because the tools and machines used to make them have been lost, or destroyed. But this potion is not magic: it is chemistry, an art which was never entirely forgotten."

Lia frowns. "I do not understand."

"Apothecaries," I explain. "The healing arts, especially the art of medicine-making, have never really been lost. Diminished from what they were, yes: Rath is right when he says the first settlers could do wondrous things. I take it you had help?" I ask him.

"Indeed. My family has enough wealth to procure the services of the City's best apothecaries. It took almost a year to properly prepare, but I finally did it. I've tested this anesthesia on multiple occasions, and I can assure you of its effectiveness."

I almost ask how Rath has tested his medicines, but keep silent. Although I desire to hear the truth, I fear Lia's reaction, should his answer be upsetting. Later, when all of this is over, I will have a talk with him

about the price he, or others, have paid for his knowledge, but not now. Now I must focus on the two lives that are depending on me.

Napaula lies on the padded table before me, nude beneath a covering blanket. I look down into her face. She smiles at me and gropes for my hand. When she finds it, she gives it a squeeze.

"I afraid. I know this best thing. My son, his time come. Now I finally see. Now I see. I happy. But I still afraid."

I nod, touched by her quiet resolve. "You will live to see your son, I promise." I look up at Lia, standing on Napaula's other side, and see tears sparkling at the corners of her eyes.

Rath fills both syringes with the clear liquid, drawing it slowly inside, measuring the levels precisely against the tiny markings on their glass sides. When he is satisfied, he taps the glass with a fingernail, dislodging the bubbles trapped inside.

He looks at the instruments laid out on a clean cloth at Napaula's side; at the multitude of candles arrayed around the table. His eyes meet mine. I see excitement capering in them. He gives me a manic grin.

"Ready?" he asks.

I nod, and turn my attention to the old woman lying before me.

Rath ties a cord around Napaula's biceps and then bends over her, tracing the veins in her arm with a fingertip. They are clearly visible beneath her thin skin, delicate, branching lines of pale blue. He takes a deep breath, then slides the needle's point beneath the skin. When he draws the syringe's plunger back, a cloud of bright red blood blossoms in the clear liquid. He smiles and slowly pushes the plunger down.

"Napaula, look at me," I whisper, gently, allowing a small portion of the power of command to infuse the words. Her eyes meet mine. In my belly, I feel the roiling of the blood magic, feel it slipping up my throat, past my lips, moving outwards with a contact more delicate than the brush of a fly's wings.

I open my inner eye and allow my vision to ride with the magic, past her eyes and nose, down the wet tube of her throat. I watch as the tendrils of translucent force divide and split, attenuating themselves until they are finer than hairs. They slide through Napaula's body, questing for her heart.

I feel her slip into unconsciousness. Feel her breathing deepen and slow. Every muscle goes slack, completely relaxed.

I travel deeper and soon I see her heart, an aged lump of gristle. It beats, slow and steady, moving her blood into her lungs and, from there, to the most distant parts of her body.

Rath's medicine is already affecting it: I can see the rhythmic beating slowing, see the first traces of hesitation in its contractions. I command the magic to slip inside, then, unsure how to assist her, will a tiny portion of my own energy down the connection between us.

To my secret vision, it looks like pale fire, or the glow on the surface of water at sunrise, a steady, orang-ewhite radiance. As I watch, it suffuses the aged organ, strengthening its beating. Softly, as if the words come to me from a very great distance, I hear Rath say, "She's asleep now. Can I begin?"

I withdraw a portion of my attention, enough to move my head up and down in a jerking nod. "Her heart is steady and strong. For now," I whisper dreamily.

"I'm going to cut. Be ready," he warns.

I split the blood magic and send some of it downwards, circling around the black veil blocking my secret sight. I find that, if I concentrate very hard, I can monitor the beating of Napaula's heart while simultaneously following this new tendril to the site of the incision. The process is difficult, and disorienting, as if each of my eyes is looking at a different object. I feel a throb in my head, like someone has clamped a vise against my temples and is tightening it with exquisite slowness.

"I'm making the first cut ... now," Rath says.

From my vantage point just beneath Napaula's skin, the blade of the scalpel is enormous, larger than a glacier. The shining wedge slices through the endless rows of interlocked skin and fat cells, severing countless blood vessels as it travels. Blood rushes to the incision, a million, million particles of blood, suddenly freed from their narrow byways, spilling out in lavish abundance.

The magic I have left to guard her heart tells me that it still beats evenly; the trickle of lifelight from my own body assures that. "She is fine. Keep going," I manage to say.

The scalpel cuts deeper, gently parting the muscles beneath the skin. More blood rushes out, released into the harsh air. Napaula's heart skips a beat, and I will more of my own life energy down through the blood magic's connection.

I flash back to the other times I used this same, hateful power, to draw red vitality *from* my victims. How many did I kill? A dozen? More? The fact that I cannot remember the exact number disturbs me more than anything in recent memory.

Her heart skips a second beat. Something is wrong. I look at the incision, and see more and more of her blood is spilling away. "Hold. She is bleeding ... very badly. Give me a moment ... to quell it," I force my distant lips to say. The scalpel withdraws.

I command the blood magic to flow into her vessels. It divides, again and again and again, until the power forms a countless multitude of delicate strands. The power threads itself into the spaces between her cells, plugging the myriad openings Rath's cut has made. I watch the crimson tide grow sluggish, ebbing until it stops altogether.

"Amazing," I hear Lia whisper.

The strain of regulating Napaula's heart and controlling the blood magic tightens the vise at my temples. "Keep going," I command.

I see the scalpel dip into Napaula's flesh once again. This time, it cuts deeply into muscles covering the dark void beneath. More blood rushes out, and I move to block it. The magic shifts, squirming against the phantom fist of my control. There is so much blood, all around, perfuming the dusty air, and it is so hungry. So very hungry.

I grit my teeth and bear down, commanding it to do my bidding. I will not allow it to revert to its base state, to draw the blood from Napaula's struggling body, no matter how much I ... no matter how much *it* wants to.

"Hurry," I whisper, forcing the word past my clenched teeth. I hear Lia mutter a curse.

The scalpel cuts again, one last parting of flesh. The lips of the wound are pulled apart.

"Take this and hold the edges open," I hear him tell Lia. When she hesitates, he barks, "Now!"

Napaula's heart is laboring, beating at twice its normal rhythm. I increase the flow of lifelight trickling into

it, trying to slow its frantic beating.

Nothing happens. I do not know how to slow it. As I watch, it skips another beat. Then another.

"Rath, something's wrong," I gasp. "You must stop. Her heart—"

"Too late to stop. I'm almost there."

"But I can't—"

"I'm almost there, damn you! Hold on to her!"

Distantly, as if from across a great void, I hear the sound of booted feet, ringing on the stones. The heavy wooden door crashes open. "Master! There is trouble at the—" I hear Eddard, Rath's serving man, begin.

"Not now!" Rath howls. "And where were you, by the gods? I need you here!"

The footsteps approach. I hear Eddard's labored breathing, as if he has run a great distance. "It is madness above. The Mor are—"

"I said not now," Rath growls. "It's all right; thanks to Kirin, I was able to give her sufficient medicine to put her deeply under. Whatever the problem is, we can discuss it later."

"No, I wish to hear what he has to say," Lia begins.

"Bloody hell, this is not the time!" Rath practically shouts. "I'm about to cut the sack. Eddard, hold that retractor. Harder. There you go."

I look at Napaula's belly with my inner sight, but the impenetrable shroud still surrounds the baby. I must see what is happening. I focus, harder than ever before, sending a fresh spike of agony into my pounding head, and withdraw a portion of my attention from inside the old woman's body. I force open my mortal eyes.

Napaula lies on the padded table before me. Her belly has been slit, low, nearly from hip bone to hip bone. I frown. The incision is far too large, much longer than the recommended length I remember from my mistress's books. Blood slicks her hips and stains the white sheets beneath her, but thanks to the blood magic no fresh tide flows from the wound. The lips are held apart by gleaming metal retractors, one held by Lia and a second by Eddard.

I peer into the incision and see a sack, pale yellow and blue, shot through with veins. It does not move. I frown as I peer at it: it is not where it should be. I look up higher, behind it, and see Napaula's tiny, shriveled womb. Whatever is in the sack is not in the birth canal.

Rath slits the surface with a fresh scalpel, working slowly. I see sweat glistening on Lia's and Eddard's brows. Holding the old woman's flesh open must be trying work.

"Almost there," Rath whispers, finishing his cut. He sets the scalpel down on the bed next to Napaula's hip and reaches inside.

His long fingers part the sack, moving with gentle grace. I see the gleam of ivory, like fresh bone, submerged in the pool of blood filling the cavity. I frown, unsure of what I am seeing.

"Goin' to be sick," Eddard moans. Then to Lia: "Hold this."

I glance over and see Lia take his retractor, just as the man sags away from the table. His puts his hands over his mouth, and coughs. Lia struggles to hold both instruments, her eyes riveted on the bloody scene before her.

Rath pulls the tiny form from the sack. It fits into his cupped palms, a still mass of pale white, slicked with fluid. He brushes his thumb across one end of it, and I see delicate features emerge from behind the veil of blood. The bridge of a nose. The small jut of a brow.

The baby looks like a statue. A statue made of bone.

"Rath, what—" I begin. I do not know what I expected from Napaula's baby, but this is not it.

"I read of this happening, sometimes," Rath says dreamily, cradling the small fossilized form. He gazes down on it, love radiating from his eyes. "Sometimes a woman becomes pregnant, but the baby fails to grow in the womb. It attaches to a convenient organ and tries to grow from there."

"Such a babe ... cannot possibly live," I say, struggling to understand him. My attention remains split between what is happening here, in the outside world, and the labor of keeping Napaula's heart beating.

"Of course not," Rath says with a smile. "It's only a matter of time before it dies. But sometimes, when the babe expires, it is too far along to be expelled, or absorbed. So, to protect itself, the mother's body does the only thing it can: it wraps the stillborn fetus in layers of bone, until it poses no more threat."

"So the babe has been dead for decades?" Lia breathes.

"I'm afraid so. Dead, but not departed, eh, Kirin? Somehow, Napaula's love kept the child's soul from moving past the vale and into the next life. She held it to her through the force of her love and her will. That makes her very much like us, doesn't it?"

The enormity of his words shocks me, threatening to unhinge my knees. How long has the dead child's soul been trapped inside of Napaula's flesh? Decades, as Rath says. Decades of darkness, and quiet, and the sound of its mother's voice, crooning a lifetime's worth of lullabies.

I imagine it, slumbering, like Napaula said, as the years reeled past. Wanting—yearning—to move beyond the vale but trapped in a prison of flesh and blood and bone by its mother's will and her terrible love. Sleeping as its body was cocooned in layer upon layer of bone until its very flesh was like stone, all the while listening to the sound of its mother's crooning song.

I remember my own son's shade, sitting on the bed beside his dead body. Remember his bottomless hunger, and fierce desire to be reborn. Doing so would have been an abomination, in every sense of the word, but even still, I was so tempted. So very tempted. I almost gave in, and allowed him to come back. I wanted to. Gods help me, I wanted to so very much.

The memory neatly undoes me, and I feel a wracking sob burn through my chest. If I could, I would weep, but my body is paralyzed, the greater part of my will sent outside my trembling flesh.

Gods, what has Napaula done?

I frown as I watch Rath gaze at the baby. A thought occurs to me. "You ... knew," I pant. "You knew what we would find."

Rath nods, never looking away from the tiny form. "Yes."

"But ... why?"

Rath meets my eyes. I see the light of madness flickering in them like black fire. "Think about it, Kirin: what power must such a thing contain? What wisdom does a decades-old soul possess? It is older than everyone in this room, save its mother. Far older. The energy which animates our creations comes from souls only recently set free from their mortal shells. What could be accomplished, if one were to use a soul like this one? Can you imagine the power such a thing could bring? We could create a weapon of such immense force that the Mor cannot hope to stand against it."

It would be powerful, indeed. But mad. Completely and irrevocably mad. You must not allow him to possess such a thing, I hear in my mind. Sister, it seems, has returned. If I could, I would shout for joy. Instead, all I can do is struggle to keep the old woman's heart alive.

"No..." I whisper. "No. You ... cannot. *Must* not."

"Put the child down. Now." Lia barks. I glance aside, and see lightning flickering in her eyes. It has never been more welcome a sight. She raises one hand, letting the retractor slip to the floor with a clatter, and points it at Rath.

Tell Lia if he will not give it up, she must kill him, my sister says. She sounds stronger now, as if she is rediscovering her voice. *He must not be allowed to have it.*

"I'm afraid I can't do that, Mistress Cho." I see his eyes flicker, glancing over her shoulder. I follow his gaze, and open my mouth to shout a warning. Too late.

Eddard's club whistles down, burying its cruel head in Lia's auburn hair. She folds with a choking gasp, her eyes rolling back as her knees let go, sprawling on the stone floor.

"No!" I scream, struggling to extricate myself from Napaula's body. I feel the old woman's heart racing, fluttering like a panicked bird in the cage of her ribs. The bleeding I have been so carefully controlling begins to flow once more from her opened belly.

"I'm very sorry, Kirin, but you know I must do this. The Mor will not stop until one or both of us are dead. Even then, they might not stop. We must defeat them, once and for all, here and now, or we will never be safe. I had to be sure Napaula survived long enough for the babe to be taken from her, lest its soul follow her across the vale. I thank you for your excellent work. I could not have done it without you."

He picks up the bloody scalpel from the sheet and moves it over the now-empty sack. I follow it, and see the veins there all stem from a single, massive vessel, thicker than my thumb.

With a deft motion, Rath severs it completely, letting out Napaula's blood in a fountain of crimson.

I wail as Napaula's life sprays across her still body, across the sheets and the padded table. The jet throbs in time with her racing pulse. Napaula lies motionless, paralyzed by the medicine Rath has given her.

Her heart stops.

Rath drops the scalpel onto the bloody sheets and turns away. Eddard steps forward and swaddles the baby in a clean cloth. The pair of them head for the door leading out to the catacombs.

I freeze, torn. If I extract the blood magic from Napaula, she will certainly die. If I do not, Rath and Eddard will escape. My eyes flicker down, to where Lia lies on the dusty stones. A trickle of red spreads out from beneath her head, but she is still breathing. As I watch, her eyes flutter, as if she is struggling to wake.

The sour smell of human waste fills the air as Napaula's bowels let go. She is dying. She would already be dead if not for the magic infusing her.

No. I cannot allow her to die. I promised her. So many promises have I broken. So very many. Damn the cost; I will not break this one.

Rath and Eddard slip from the room and out into the darkness beyond. I must let them go, for now. But I will find them again. Whatever it takes, I will find them.

I close my eyes and plunge my attention and will back into Napaula's body. The heart first; it must beat, or all else will not matter. I focus on the tendrils that thread around and through it, then send a bolt of my lifelight down the connection and into the still organ.

It spasms, then begins beating once more. An instant later, a wave of fatigue rolls over me, dimming my sight. I watch it for a few moments longer, waiting for its beating to grow even. As I watch, the redgold of my own life glow smoothes the frantic pulsing. Her blood once more flows.

But she is still losing too much blood from the severed vessel that Rath so deftly cut. I command the magic to extend a tendril up into its many branches, threading them back together at the source of the cut. Using my secret eye for vision, I lower my hands into her belly and gently move the severed ends together with my fingers.

The blood magic winds through the sliced edges, lacing them together. As they do, they draw cells from their places along the vessel's walls, the many threads restacking them like bricks in a wall, almost faster than I can follow. Their dance is elegant and immensely complex.

As I watch, the magic knits the edges of the damaged vessel, much as they did with Captain Garrett, until, moments later, it is smooth and whole once more. I feel a surge of pride, only slightly diminished by a sensation of weakness. Always it is like this when I bend the red magic to my will.

I turn my attention to the gaping wound in her belly, and my newfound optimism falters. Compared to the sliced vessel, it is a vast chasm, titanic and irreparable. I do not have the strength, not after restarting her heart.

My sight grows dimmer, and I sway. My head feels so light, as if it will blow away like dandelion fluff at the merest breeze. A memory comes to me: the girl in the flowered dress, outside the iron fence guarding the cranes beside the Northwatch Cliffs. I remember the way that the maddened horse's shadow fell over her, just before its iron-shod hooves reaped her life. Remember the sound of snapping bones and her last, plaintive cry. I could not help her.

No. No more death. Not while life still remains in my breast. Even if it kills me, I will not let Napaula go. Let us journey together across the vale if that is our fate, but if she is to die, I will die with her, and we will walk the lands beyond this one hand in hand.

With the last of my fading sight, I look down at Lia. I want to bring the memory of her with me, holding it inside my heart and mind for as long as I can. In the vision imparted me by my secret eye, her life glow is fierce, and steady, despite her head wound. She is young and so very strong, the patterns of her life shining like molten gold in her veins. A thought occurs to me.

I must. No time to rethink, or doubt. I wish she were awake, so I could ask for her permission, but there is no time. No time.

She would give it, were she able. She will understand, my sister says. I pray she is right.

"Forgive me, love," I whisper.

With a thought, I command the blood magic to flow inside her.

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CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

Lia groans, stirring against the chill stones. How much time has passed? The candles all still burn; they look no different. Not long, I pray.

I turn and look at her, struggling on the floor. Lia's blue eyes slide open. They are ringed with deep purple bruises, as if she has been beaten. She moves to rise, then flinches, flopping back to the stones.

"Don't try to get up," I croak. "You have a head wound. Probably a concussion. You're lucky Eddard's club didn't catch you square, or it would have killed you."

"What ... what did you...?" she begins, lying on her side, eyes closed. "I remember trying to hold Napaula's incision open, after Eddard got sick. Then I heard a noise, behind me. Someone struck me."

"Eddard," I confirm. "He must have faked his illness, then picked up the club while you were preoccupied."

"Bastard," she groans. "I remember lying on the floor, trying to wake up. I needed to help you. Then you..." She frowns. Her eyes open, the blue irises filling with horror. "Then you sent the magic ... I remember you sending it ... oh, gods. Putting it inside of me. It was *inside* of me." She drags her hands across her belly, as if feeling for traces of corruption. Her spare frame shudders.

"Lia, I'm sorry. I had no choice," I plead. "Napaula was dying. I had to do something. I didn't have anything left to give her—"

I feel my strength returning. I should be exhausted, unable to speak, let alone move. Did I take a portion of the lifelight I channeled from Lia for myself? Such was not my intention, but...

I struggle to my feet, pushing up the unyielding wall. The room spins as I regain my feet, pirouetting gracefully around my head. I hold the stones and breathe deeply until the fit passes.

Cautiously, afraid of what I will find, I step towards the bloody table. I peer at Napaula's still form.

The wound is closed. All that's left is a pale scar, running across her belly from hip bone to hip bone. She breathes easy and deep, snoring softly.

Napaula is asleep.

I look at her with my secret sight. The patterns of her life tell me the tale.

The sickness that exists throughout her body has spread. Without the baby's unnatural vitality keeping it in check, it is multiplying at an alarming rate. Golden power flows through her veins: it is the life I drew from Lia and sent down through the tendrils of the blood magic. It bolsters her. But it cannot last.

Satisfied Napaula is in no immediate danger, I move to Lia. I kneel beside her, then probe at the edges of her head wound, ignoring her hissed protest. With my secret sight, the hairline crack in her skull is obvious. As with all head wounds, there is much blood, caked in her tousled curls. I move to face her and see with relief that both of her pupils are steady and even, both the same size.

"Lia, I want you to wait here, and help Napaula when she wakes. Take her home. Try to make her comfortable, if you can. Then I want you to rest."

Lia's weary eyes meet mine. She frowns. "What is it? Is Napaula in danger?"

I nod. "She'll die. Everything I did ... everything *we* did, was just temporary. She always knew she was dying, and all I wanted to do was give her the chance to see her son's face before she passed. I swore to her that she would, and now I've broken even that promise."

"Where are you going?" she asks.

"I must find Rath, and keep him from doing something terrible."

She nods, and struggles to a sitting position. "Then you should go. I will attend to Napaula. We will make our way home."

"Lia, I'm so sorry for all of this—" I begin. Lia's bark of laughter silences me.

"Sorry? *Sorry?*" She looks up at me, and I see the lightning arcing behind her eyes. "Speak not to me of sorrow. I have had my fill."

"Lia, I—"

"Go!" she screams, turning away.

I nod and move to the open door leading to the catacombs, grabbing a candle and holder as I pass. I stop in the doorway. "I love you, Lia. I will make this right."

She does not answer; instead, she stares at the floor. The blade of ice in my chest grows colder, twisting savagely beneath my heart. I do not feel like I can take a proper breath. Lia remains silent.

I turn and stalk out into the low corridor.

I kneel, committing Rath's and Eddard's dusty boot prints to memory, then move down the low-ceilinged corridor. At the first juncture, the footsteps turn left. I let out my breath. They are returning the way they came.

I hurry down the passage, pausing only occasionally when other thoroughfares cross my path. Once I assure myself that the dust coating the floor is unbroken, I continue on.

I slow when I approach the place where I saw Rath's sweetling hiding in its niche in the wall, then let out my held breath when I see a scattering of rubble on the floor. It is not there. Rath must have commanded it to follow him when he passed.

What will I do if Rath has left behind some of his minions in the ruined basement? There were so many; he can afford to leave a few to cover his retreat. The blood magic is useless against them, for they have no blood. And I cannot stand against them physically: even a single sweetling is more than a match for my knife.

I shake my head and press on. If he has left a rear guard then I will get past it, somehow. I must.

I turn left and right, following Rath's tracks, and soon I recognize the rough walls leading to the ruined basement. I slow, senses alert. My knife hilt fills my hand with empty reassurance.

I pass through the tumbled wall and hold my candle's feeble flame high. The basement seems empty. The floor is crisscrossed with dozens of clawed tracks, all flowing towards the stairs.

I met out my held breath. Thank the gods. I hurry towards the steps.

I extinguish the candle at the top of the steps. There is light in the sky, a ruddy glow, bright enough to

read by. I hear a sound, an eerie wailing. It takes me a moment to place the sound, but when I do, my blood runs cold.

"Oh, no," I whisper.

I scramble across the crumbled floor, tripping in holes and on half-seen rubble. I must get outside, must see the northern sky.

I burst through the half-open front doors and pelt out into the street. The sky glow intensifies, a brilliant bar of orange, dominating the northern sky. I run to the cross-street and turn my face towards it.

The watchfires atop the Armitage near the Lion Gate are lit. The blaze sends a column of black smoke, shot through with sparks, up into the night sky. Several other fires, up and down the wall, have also been lit.

The wailing is repeated, a sound like a titan's cry. It rolls out, across the City, echoing from the countless buildings. I have heard of this sound, have been trained by my superiors on the wall to recognize it, but I, like every other living resident of the City have never actually heard it, for it has not been sounded in the lifetime of anyone now living.

It is the siren, located in the Arquis Vae. It has been silent for generations. Only in the most dire peril is it to be sounded. Now it sends its warning cry across the sleeping city. Hearing it, in conjunction with the fires atop the mighty wall can only mean one thing.

The Mor are close to breaking through the wall.

I look down. The cobblestones retain no imprint of Rath or Eddard's feet. I cannot track them in such an environment. Oh, gods, what shall I do? If I cannot locate him ... if I cannot stop him. If only someone saw where he went—

I pause as a thought occurs to me. *Yes, that might just work*, I hear my sister whisper in response. *But be cautious. They might kill you out of hand for what you did to them.*

"I'll have to chance it. If anyone saw Rath and Eddard, it's them."

I step back inside and collect my long bow and arrows from where I left them, beside the door, then hurry into the dark city streets. I turn left at the first intersection, navigating by dead reckoning, moving deeper into Low Town.

As I move through the abandoned streets, they tell their story to my trained tracker's eye. They are filled with the debris of hasty flight: articles of clothing and abandoned chests. Many of the houses lining the boulevard stand open, front doors swinging in the raw wind.

I can see it in my imagination: countless families, woken by the siren's chilling wail. Seeing the watch fires must have begun a panic. I can imagine them, leaving in droves, streaming towards the main thoroughfares leading south, towards the Northwatch Cliffs. I avoid the larger roads; they will doubtless be choked with panicked, fleeing citizens.

A few turnings later and I see Rath's burned manor ahead. Further down the street, where it crosses the main avenue of Dolphin Street, I see the glow of a thousand torches. I can barely make out a dull roar, the sound of countless voices, babbling in panic.

Rath's street is wider than the avenues I traveled down to get here; there are other people in the road with me. Some look away, guilty, when I make eye contact. Looters. Scavengers, already circling,

looking for advantage in the chaos.

I stop in front of the gates. The chain that secured them has been cut and cast aside. The burned manor still steams in the damp chill. I wonder if they are still here, watching for Rath's return, or if this new emergency has drawn them away. I pray they have not left.

"I am Kirin, of the north!" I shout. "I have just come from the hiding place of Rath, of the house of Lan! I bring important news for your master the Count Savard!"

The others in the street with me stare as if I have lost my mind. Then the name I have uttered penetrates their fog, and they scatter, disappearing like roaches into dark cracks and shadowed doorways. Cowards. I stand in the middle of the street, fully exposed. My shoulder blades itch, possibly a reaction to unseen eyes, possibly my own imagination.

"You killed three good men, *avuna*," I hear a soft voice say behind me. Gods, such stealth. I force myself to remain still, lest I startle him into attacking.

"I know. I'm sorry. They surprised me. But now we have bigger problems. You must listen to me—"

"The man you killed was my cousin. He was only twenty, damn you. He was just a boy."

I turn, slowly, my hands held out from my sides. I keep my eyes down, on the ground. Savard may have instructed them about the power in my gaze, and raising my eyes may be seen as an attack. Doubtless archers are even now sighting down their shafts, calculating their arrows' drop and the amount of windage required to skewer my heart. I must not give them reason to attack.

All I can see is the hem of his black robes; the same kind of garb worn by my would-be abductors, the same as the man I killed in the street, like a dog. The memory flows across the slumbering coils of my magic, rousing it to wakefulness. The sensation sickens me, and I taste sour bile in the back of my throat.

"I'm sorry for your loss. More sorry than you can know, but you must listen to me. I know what Rath is doing. I know his plans. I must make a report to your master. We must stop him."

"Don't look at me, witch, or you'll be dead before your traitor's body can hit the ground," the man says.

"I understand. I will do as you say. Just, please, listen to me, I beg you."

"Kneel. Slowly. Then lie on the ground, facedown. Do it now, or I'll give the command to shoot."

I sink to the chill stones, wincing as my knees strike the unyielding surface. The cobbles are slicked with ice and rain, which soaks through my pants. I lower myself to my belly.

As soon as I am down on the ground, the man moves behind me, pressing his knee into my upper back. Hands pull my bow from my unresisting fingers. "I have her!" he calls. "Hands back! Now!"

I comply. I feel him shift, then a rough cord is slipped over my hands, securing them. Booted feet scurry towards us, just before the world goes dark.

The men raise me, hauling me to my feet. The blindfold they have tied around my head is brutally tight. I could command them with a word to release me, but I did not come here to fight.

"Will you take me to Savard, now? I promise I will not resist. He must know what I know."

"What d'ye think, boss?" one of the men whispers. "If nothin' else we should be gettin' her off the street."

My captor hesitates. I cannot see him, but the indecision in his grip speaks volumes. His hand shakes, ever so slightly, where it clutches my biceps. He leans forward to murmur in my ear, and I feel the tip of a dagger press into my lower back.

"Give me a reason to kill you, bitch. Please."

"Later," I reply, turning my blind face towards his. "Right now the Mor are coming and your master has need of my knowledge."

"You'd better be right about that. Otherwise..." The knife presses harder, drawing out an involuntary gasp.

The man grunts, but lowers the blade. The awful pressure in my back disappears. The men haul me, blind and stumbling, down the street.

We walk for a long time, turning often. Soon I lose all sense of direction. Every few minutes the siren atop the Arquis Vae calls out. Every time it does, it sounds closer.

The men avoid the more trafficked thoroughfares, preferring the quieter, rambling ways. Sometimes I hear the sound of multitudes of voices raised in fear, or anger, floating in the winter air like the roaring of some gargantuan beast.

My captors turn away from the disturbances, sticking to the side streets. I cannot see past the blindfold. Soon, its pressure has my head throbbing.

Inside, the blood magic writhes and twists, calling out with its terrible, silent voice for their lives. It claws and pushes, trying to slip out of me, desperate to burrow itself into warm, struggling meat. It wants nothing less than to rend and tear and pull, until their blood rushes out of them in streams of smoking scarlet.

My sister has fallen silent once more. I dare not whisper for her; the men might think I am calling forth some demonic ally. Their leader has made the penalty for such trickery, real or perceived, abundantly clear.

"Are we almost there?" I ask, desperate to distract myself from the struggle I am waging in my own body.

"Soon. Shut your mouth," the leader barks.

We turn and I hear an iron gate open, then close. We walk up an uneven flagstone path, then climb a short set of stairs. The leader stops at a man's challenge, answering back in the same unknown language. I cannot be sure, but it sounds the same as what I heard the Gray Circle speaking at Rath's.

Then we are inside. A succession of rooms. Footfalls on wooden floors. The intense murmur of many conversations. I am led to a room and told to sit down. I obey.

My captors file out, leaving me alone. I shift my hands inside my bonds, testing them. The flesh there is already bruised, and the effort tears something. I feel the first trickle of blood, running down onto my palms.

Time passes. I rise, pacing out the small room. Six paces by twelve. Nothing in the room but two chairs, across from one another. I strive to remain calm in the face of my growing unease. I don't have the time to sit here, waiting. I walk to where I remember the door was, fumble about with my bound hands until I locate it.

"Hello?" I call out. There may be guards outside. "Please. I need to speak to Count Savard immediately."

If he will not speak with you then you will have to escape, and go after Rath on your own, I hear, softly from inside.

"Sister, thank the gods. There you are."

Here I am, aye, but almost not so. It was a near thing.

"What happened? I can barely hear you, even now"

The Mor. When you opened your mind to them, they tried to come inside. They would have merged their thoughts with yours, and forced you to fling yourself from the top of the wall. I did what I could to block them, but they were so many. They were so strong. They cast me aside, as broken as you would have been if you had fallen. Almost, the effort dispelled me; sent me back to my place beyond the vale. It took me quite a while to remember myself. When I finally did, I tried sending you some sign that I was still here, but I was so weak. You could not hear me.

"I thought I'd lost you," I whisper, tears stinging in my eyes, more painful than the biting rope against my wrists. "Sister, I've done terrible things. Things I swore I would never do again."

Yes, I know. I was with you when you killed the Gray Circle man outside your house.

She says nothing more, but the tone in her voice speaks volumes. I hang my head.

I know your heart, sister, she finally says. I can taste your pain. I know you only did what you felt you had to. But that does not make it right. Every time you use the magic to harm, you lose another piece of yourself. You make it stronger. The blood magic is like a living thing: the more work it does, for good or ill, the stronger it becomes. You must try and channel its power into making others whole. Make that aspect of its power the dominant one.

I think about the keening siren atop the Arquis Vae; the lit watch fires. Think about the Mor at the gates. They might already be inside. "What if I cannot?"

Her silence is as eloquent as a shrug.

Before I can say more, I hear footfalls outside the door, then the sound of a key in the lock. I close my mouth on my unasked questions.

The door opens, and I hear several men hurry inside. They surround me. After a moment, I hear a last set of footfalls pad into the room. I hear the whisper of supple leather as whoever it is approaches me, then sits in the chair across from mine.

"I don't think we need that, no, no," Count Savard says. "Remove her blindfold."

"Sir, are you quite sure? They say she can kill a man with a glance. Or steal away their will—"

"If you sense I am in distress, then kill her, by all means," the count replies. He does not sound afraid. I hear someone step close behind me. I feel a blade slide between the cloth and my skin and force myself to not flinch. The blade stops, pressed painfully against the tender flesh of my cheek.

"We understand one another, yes?" Savard says to me in his high-pitched woman's voice. It is as soft as lamb's wool wrapped around a sword blade.

"Completely. I did not come here to fight. I came to help you stop Rath Lan."

"Cut her bonds."

"But, sir—" the voice says again, and is swiftly stopped. I can imagine the count's glare, and suppress a smile. The blade turns, slicing through the cloth. As it falls away, the pounding in my head spikes, and I hiss at the surge of fresh pain. The blade severs the cord binding my wrists a moment later.

"Now then, can I get you anything? Tea? Wine?" the count says.

I blink over at him, shaking my head partially to answer his question as well as to dispel the discomfort of my aching temples.

The count looks different from our last meeting, his spare, narrow-shouldered frame swathed in the black leather and cloth of the Gray Circle. The garments make him look larger, somehow. More menacing. The mantle of his lowered hood surrounds his limp brown hair. There is a sword at his belt, one of the slender dueling blades the nobility favors, its weight offset by a long knife at his other hip.

"Count Savard, I bring you news of Rath Lan," I begin.

"Yes, yes. We know you've been meeting with him. Interesting that he managed to convince you to help him so swiftly, given your ... rumored experiences with the Mor. But not unexpected. Not unexpected, no, no."

"You ... you knew?" I stammer. I'm not sure why this surprises me; after all, even Rath himself warned me about this formidable man.

"We suspected Rath would try and contact you, yes of course. After all, we saw his interest in you at Argus Cho's party. And Master Lan's peculiar interests are ... not entirely unknown to us."

Something in his tone prompts me to listen closer, to lean forward and gaze deeply into his dingy brown eyes. Behind me, I hear the creak of leather as the count's bodyguards shift, preparing themselves to strike me down.

"Do you know what Rath is planning? Do you know what he can do?" I whisper.

The count shifts a bit, uncomfortable for the first time. "We ... we have heard many things about him. And his relative. An aunt by marriage, I believe, yes?" He glances over my shoulder, at one of the men, then nods again. "Yes, an aunt. There are those still at court who remember her face and ... other features. As well as the stories that were told about her."

"She came from the south and had eyes like mine, you mean."

"Yes, yes, of course. And such intriguing stories. Tales of speaking to the souls of the departed. And commanding them. Perhaps you know something of this?"

"I do not have time for this, Count," I say, cutting off his inquiry. Savard frowns as if disapproving of this breach of protocol, and some insight tells me this is what the man lives for. This matching of wits, in order to wrest the truth from an unwilling subject.

I do not care. I do not know where Lia, or Napaula, are. They could be out in the streets even now, amongst the frightened mob. I need to protect them.

I describe the house that I tracked Rath to as best I can remember. "You must send men there. Now. They are to bring Lia Cho and the old woman with her to a safe place. I may need to summon them to my side, and they must be protected. I need your word, Count."

"Tell me why I should help you," Savard says, his foppish demeanor dropping away like a discarded cloak. What I see beneath it is hard and obdurate, as unyielding as oak roots, and as twisted. I remind myself to never, ever, trust this man. "I have enough from your own lips to arrest you on the charge of necromancy," he continues. "The Mor are at our gates, and my men are needed for the defense of the city. That much looks to be inevitable. I should toss you in a cell beneath the Armitage right now, and deal with you later, when all of this is over."

I take a deep breath, resisting the urge to rail at him. It will not help to lose my temper, and doing so may provoke the blood magic to a course that will get me killed.

"You must help me because I know what Rath plans to do. He must be stopped."

Savard stares at me for several long moments. His level gaze once again reminds me of a scale, weighing and appraising my words and demeanor. A tiny smile turns up the corners of his narrow lips, and I realize that, despite the peril of our situation, he is enjoying this immensely.

Cold-hearted bastard, my sister whispers in my head. *Damn him, and all the rest. This is no game, no idle amusement.*

I push aside a bitter laugh. I do not know what is more sad: that my sister has finally managed to somehow see and understand my disdain of the court and their ways, or that it took her death and rebirth in my own flesh to make her see it.

A small eternity later, the count drops his eyes, then looks up, past me, to the men standing at my back.

"You have someone following him?" he asks softly.

"Aye," the reply comes, from behind.

"Then we must move. Come, Lady Kirin of the North. We can talk more as we walk."

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CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

We stride out, into the chill air. It is thick with sparks and drifting ash and the reek of things burning. I look north, and see that more signal fires have been lit atop the Armitage. Even from this distance, I can hear a sound, the voices of countless men, soldiers and mages, raised in anger. Or terror.

I pause on the steps of Count Savard's safe house and gape at the spectacle. A moment later, the siren atop the Arquis Vae slices the night with a blade of ear-piercing noise.

Two dozen men, Gray Circle all, follow us out into the street: dressed completely in black, deep hoods concealing their faces. They move swiftly, silent as ghosts, fanning out across the thoroughfare. Others sprint off into the night, dispatched on unknown missions.

"Come, Lady Kirin," Savard calls. "We must hurry. My men have report on Lan's last position, but we will need to hurry if we're to catch up with him."

I turn my back on the orange glow atop the mighty wall and hurry to follow the spymaster and his men. Even unseen, it pulls at me with phantom fingers of duty. And guilt. Men who I fought beside are even now dying, burned and smashed by the Mor's enchanted stones.

In all the time I stood with them atop the Armitage, I never heard the sirens, nor the eerie calls that float down towards us. The fury the Mor must be unleashing is almost beyond imagining, but my mind conjures up terrible images nonetheless. I should be on the wall. Should use every last shred of my magic to defend the city, and Lia.

You know that here, with Savard, is where your wisdom will do the most good. Stop being foolish.

"Where was he last seen?" I ask, fighting the urge to turn back and run for the wall.

The count looks at one of the cloaked and hooded men surrounding us, and nods. "On the far east side of the city," the man replies. "He could be trying to put as much distance between the Lion's Mouth and himself as possible. He must have seen the fires and heard the siren."

I try to recall the city maps that Lia showed me, to remember the things she told me about the Imperial City's geography. East? Why east? The city proper is much denser to the west, where it sprawls into uncounted miles of tightly packed houses and other buildings.

If one desired to become lost quickly, the west side would be a far better choice. There are a million places to disappear in such a place. I cannot imagine a man like Rath fleeing unprepared, so it reasons that he must have prepared a bolt hole, perhaps even several of them, in advance. There is nothing to the east but the increasingly large estates of the nobility, all protected by high walls and small armies of private guards.

"Perhaps someone assists him," I say. "He may have an accomplice in one of the landed families, or amongst the court. He may be planning to go to ground in one of the estates."

Savard shakes his head. "If he had a confidant at court, I'd know it," he says, firmly. "Rath Lan is considered to be a bit of an eccentric, and is far less liked at court than his brothers. As a youngest son, he has some access to the family's fortune, but almost none of its political power. Besides, he's had little interest in playing that game up until now."

"But he was at Argus Cho's party for Lia. The people there were all angling for more attention and recognition."

"Not Rath. He was there to meet you, I'd bet my reputation on it."

Of course. Didn't he just as much say he'd been gathering stories about me?

Well, forgive me for being blunt, but you share a house with the daughter of the head of the College of Elemental Air, I remember him telling me. And: ... afterwards, I tried to keep track of what happened to everyone. Especially you.

At the time, I had simply thought his comments were empty flattery, the pretty mouthings of a man more interested in loosening the laces of my dress than in truly learning of me. Gods, how could I have been so blind?

"You're right. I am sorry for contradicting you, Master Spy." If I could, I would curtsy as protocol demands, even though the gesture would look foolish in my leather breeches, so I settle for a stiff little bow. He waves aside the apology.

"Save the courtesies for a garden party, milady. We're about rougher work now, and I have no time for it. No, no. I need you to tell me what you know about Rath Lan, and why I'm here with you now, rather than helping prepare the defense."

As quickly as I can, I recount my meeting with Rath at Argus Cho's estate, noting his interest in my black eyes. I speak of glimpsing the hunched shape in the bazaar, and of our second, seemingly chance encounter there. By the time I tell him of my return several days later, and my meeting with Rolf and his gang of bully boys, the streets we move along have changed: they are wider and more prosperous looking, the paving stones smooth and level as a tabletop.

"I managed to convince one of them to tell me about a house he saw; a place where someone had been taken," I say. "I only meant to reconnoiter the building, but when I slipped inside the gate, I met Rath's man, Eddard. While I was talking to him, I saw the first of Rath's swee—Rath's creatures."

The count demands details then. How strong are they? How fast? How are they vulnerable? I tell him what I know, in plain terms, hiding nothing. The men listen to me, their incredulous looks slowly turning to ones of worry, then alarm.

I speak briefly of our conversation inside the mansion, skipping entirely Rath's attempt to poison me. His duplicity is not germane to the issue at hand.

Besides, my sister purrs, Savard is said to be a master of the subtle art of poison himself. Any spymaster would be, and the count is considered to be something of a legend. Best if he not know of your ability to neutralize that advantage, lest he decide to leave no witnesses to what happens here tonight. I nod, silently. I have heard these stories as well.

The neighborhood continues to grow more and more grand the further east we travel. All around us now sprawl guarded manors, the facades of their surrounding walls blank and uninviting, topped with black iron spikes or daggers of downwards-facing glass.

"And what happened then?" the count asks.

"He took me to meet an old woman with a very peculiar condition. She was venerable, eighty if she were a day, and yet despite her age, she was unmistakably pregnant."

"Pregnant?" He raises one bushy eyebrow and shares a look with one of his men. "Indeed."

"You know her?" I ask.

"Not exactly," Savard replies. "But I've heard stories of her. I'd chalked up the rumors of her to simple misunderstanding. She has lived in Low Town for years, begging or selling odd wares at the fringes of the established bazaars."

"The stories are true. The old woman has been carrying the babe since she was a young woman. And before you ask," I interrupt, "I can tell you that her condition, while rare, was not caused by any supernatural agency. These things sometimes happen."

"So, what does Lan want with her?" he asks.

I hesitate to continue. Doing so will force me to reveal intimate details of my powers; of my second sight and my ability to hear the thoughts of the Mor. Even the power of the blood magic.

He has already admitted to me that he knows, or at least suspects, my ability to command the dead. However, years of hiding who I am and what I can do, of enduring the prejudice of the ignorant and the pious because of my black eyes, has left me unwilling to share too much.

As if reading my thoughts, Savard stops in the middle of the street, and faces me.

"What is it? Speak up woman," he commands.

"I ... It is difficult to speak of it. I have spent a lifetime hiding from people like you."

"You came to me, remember," he says, not unkindly, but I sense the steel riding beneath his gentle tone. This is not a man who I can even dream of trifling with. I nod and walk forward once more, Savard and his men following behind.

"The babe died more than sixty years ago," I say, plunging into the recounting. "But, unlike a usual miscarriage, the babe was not expelled from the womb, for it did not grow there. Instead, it grew in her belly, nestled amongst her organs. In such cases, it is usual for the the baby to die, and then be taken back into the mother's body, very early in the pregnancy. In the old woman's case, however, the babe lived for almost six months before the inevitable happened and it expired. Since the fetus could not be pushed out in the usual fashion, and it was too large to be reabsorbed, her body did the only thing it could do: it turned the babe into bone to protect itself from rot and infection. She has carried it inside her ever since."

"That's fascinating, to be sure, but I don't see why Rath Lan would—"

"Napaula, the old woman, used to sing to the baby," I say, hearing in my head the song I have heard her sing over and over. "She talked to it. Loved it with a love only a mother can possess. To her, the baby was not dead, but was merely sleeping. I believe that, somehow, her love prevented the babe's soul from departing this plane and moving beyond the Vale. That soul has lived inside of her for decades, becoming more powerful—and more mad—as the years passed."

"And you think that Lan can make use of such a soul," the count says. It is not a question, but I nod anyway.

"Yes, but I'm not sure what..." I let my sentence trail off as we turn a corner, revealing a tall iron fence. Beyond it, I can see trees and bushes, their skeletal forms fitfully illuminated by the orange sky. There is a hill beyond the fence, and in the dim glow I can just make out rows and rows of pale shapes, standing in orderly lines.

I recall Lia's map in a flash of inspiration. I remember the huge, park-like area dominating the eastern edge of the Imperial City.

I stop in the middle of the road, my mouth falling open in a shocked gasp. Savard stops a moment later, frowning at my sudden silence.

"I know why he has come here," I say.

"What is it?" he asks.

I point towards the iron fence and the rows of white headstones beyond it. "That is Griffin Park," I say, "the Imperial City's oldest graveyard. Thousands are buried there; perhaps millions."

"Yes. So?"

"Rath worships death. What better place for his final triumph than the resting place of so many of the dead? I just hope..." I let my word trail off. Why frighten these men more than they already are?

Savard does not take the hint. "Hope what? Tell me."

I look him in the eye, nodding. Very well. "I just hope he hasn't discovered some way to reanimate the bones and moldering bodies of so many countless thousands. Old tales speak of such power, though my mistress said that there were limits to what even a necromancer of great power can accomplish. That it is impossible to raise a body that has lain in the ground for so long."

Behind us, the siren atop the Arquis Vae continues to call. The light flares as a gout of flame, twisting like a winged serpent, rises above the rooftops, beneath clouds pregnant with blue lightning. The elemental mages are fighting back.

The count shrugs and checks the slide of his blade in its scabbard. "What does impossible mean any more?" he says.

"What do you think Rath hopes to accomplish with this?" Count Savard says to me, as we wait for one of his men to remove the stout lock and chain securing one of the memorial garden's many gates. Beyond it, I see the sprawling acres of Griffin Park, its rolling hills scattered with groves and copses.

I see rows of headstones, running in geometric lines across the cropped grass. I hear a sound, a scraping footfall no louder than the sigh of the wind, and turn to see that a second group of black clad figures, fifteen strong, hurrying towards us. Reinforcements.

Now we number almost thirty, every one a trained killer. I would pity any mortal foe foolish enough to stand against such a force, but Rath's sweetlings are not mortal. I shake my head as I realize the count is waiting impatiently for my answer.

I think back to the last warm day I shared with Lia, sitting at the small table in the corner cafe down the street from our house, sipping coffee. I began to tell her a story then, a Harvestpast Night ghost tale I heard as a child. I did not tell her the story was real, the truth of it revealed during my training in the healing and necromantic arts.

"One of my mistress's books spoke of a *voud'hule*," I begin. "It is..." I grope for a term he will understand, "like a beacon for the spirits of the departed. A lighthouse whose beam shines powerfully into the dark beyond, drawing the specters of the dead like moths to a signal fire. A *voud'hule* is a cursed thing, crafted from the soul of a dead necromancer of exceeding power. They are drawn back and compelled to enter a talisman or token. With the proper rituals and preparations, empowered by the might of the *voud'hule*, a skillful necromancer can summon and command an army of undead servants."

The count frowns, struggling to take in what I have told him. When he next speaks, skepticism threads

through his words. "But ... could the child's soul perform the task and power the talisman?"

I shake my head. "I don't see how it could, no. The babe is many things: certainly it has power. It had the ability to hide itself from my inner sight, for example, which is why I had no idea what to expect when Rath began his surgery. But, no matter what its decades of imprisonment have made it, it is still essentially a child, lacking anything we would call discipline. It would require a soul with immense skill, and, more importantly, *focus*, to complete Rath's task and power the artifact."

"Maybe he plans to sacrifice himself. If he truly wants to defend the City from the Mor, maybe he is willing to pay the ultimate price."

"Perhaps," I agree, but the theory does not sit well. A man like Rath would want to see the results of his handiwork, not sacrifice himself in the eleventh hour. Unless I have misjudged the depth of his convictions?

"And has he had the time to prepare such a ritual?"

"It would take days to assemble all the required elements and set them up properly," I reply with a shrug. "But, who knows how long he's planned this? He might have set this up days or weeks ago. All he would need is a sheltered spot, one where he did not have to worry about his preparations being disturbed or discovered."

Behind him, the Gray Circle man completes his task, snapping open the massive lock. The heavy chain rattles free, slithering to the ground like an iron snake. We move inside, the men spreading out in a well-rehearsed wedge, eyes scanning the shadows.

"What would he require?" Savard asks, his gaze constantly moving, and alert.

"The space would not need to be large, no more than ten feet square, I'd reckon. A smooth floor would be best, stone or wood, in order for Rath to sketch out the sigils required by the ritual, but flattened earth would not be a hindrance. An ideal place would be something like..."

My sentence trails off as a row of majestic stone buildings comes into view. They range in size from no larger than a garden shed to those as big as any house. All have ornate roofs made of verdigris-stained copper, adorned with fantastical shapes: carved mythical beasts, squatting on the eaves like sentinels. Thoughts tumble together like puzzle pieces, snapping together to form a final, clear picture. Inside, my sister gasps as she tastes my fear.

"I know where Rath went and how he means to finish the ritual," I say, my body already responding to my thought, like a chill fist clenching beneath my breastbone.

I turn to Savard, grabbing his shoulder. "Rath had an aunt, just as you said before. A southerner. Her eyes were as black as mine, the result of ... a specific kind of knowledge. Rath was desperate to learn her skills, but she would never teach him. She knew that such knowledge is too dangerous to let fall into the wrong hands."

"I don't see what—" he begins, but I silence him with a gesture.

"If she had black eyes then she was very powerful. But in the end, like everything mortal, she died. Died, and was likely buried in this very graveyard. If Rath were looking for a soul to create his *voud'hule*, then hers would be an excellent choice."

Savard ponders this for a moment, frowning, then says, "You told me Rath's minions are the result of newly slain souls, returned to their former bodies. But Rath's aunt died years ago. Is it possible to call

back a soul so long departed?"

I think back to the night I called back my sister's soul. She had been dead for weeks by then, her body desiccated and ripe by the time I pried open her coffin. In the pitch black at the bottom of the grave, I could hear the sounds of the countless tiny lives her body was giving birth to.

I can still taste the three mouthfuls of her flesh, eaten dutifully, as required by the summoning ritual. It was soft and pungent, thick with the reek of decay, but I devoured it eagerly, like the finest venison, reveling as I watched her soul drawn to me, then into me.

I remember the weeks and months of fighting as her spirit, crazed from her traumatic death and violent return from beyond, fought with me, driving me almost to suicide before we came to an accommodation.

"Oh, yes. Such things are very much possible, sir," I whisper. "And, unless I miss my guess, Rath Lan means to do just that with his dead aunt's spirit. He will call her forth and place her shade in the stone baby, making it into a *voud'hule*. From there, if the ritual is successful, he will use its power to raise an army of the dead to fight against the Mor."

Even as I speak the words, I feel their truth, shadowed by something else, a niggling feeling that I am forgetting something. The theory feels correct, and matches what I know, and have felt, from Lan's character.

An army of the undead would indeed be terrifying to any human army, my sister whispers. But, the creatures the voud'hule will raise will be slow and decrepit, little better than puppets. Their value will be against the minds and spirits of those who must face them. But they will pose little, if any, actual physical threat to the Mor. Unless you think they would fear such a foe?

I shake my head. I cannot see it. The only reaction I have seen the Mor give to the undead is unbridled loathing. I have often experienced the sensation of fear coming from them, but not the kind that demoralizes or incapacitates. The Mor always destroy what they fear, utterly and completely. It is what they do. They would not even be slowed by an army of the dead.

I hurry along with the men. I sigh and tell myself to let go of my uncertainty. Rath plans to use the stone baby as the talisman for his summoning, and his departed Aunt's necromancer spirit to empower it, I am sure of it. If we can stop him from accomplishing that, then it will not matter what use he plans to put it to.

Savard pauses to share a few whispered words with one of his men, then follows the line of his pointing finger. "The Lan family plot is this way," the count says, striding across the manicured grass.

As one, we turn and follow.

The private graveyard is small compared to others nearby, a rough square plot only fifty yards across, surrounded by its own ornate fence. I see headstones, some accompanied by small statues or sitting benches, meandering in easy rows over the gently sloping ground. The rear of the plot is dominated by six stone burial houses, set beside a thicket of leafless trees.

Savard's man bends and slides a pick into the lock securing the private gate, while a second smears the iron hinges with grease. They make no sound, communicating with each other with small gestures and unspoken looks.

A moment later, the lock snicks open and the chain is withdrawn, rattling a bit as it is pulled from the bars. Savard scowls at even this tiny sound. Seconds later, the gate swings open, soundless on freshly oiled hinges, and we slip inside.

The mausoleums across from us are dark, but my eye catches a gleam of light from the leftmost: faint candlelight escaping from behind a thick curtain. I touch the count on the shoulder and point towards it. He nods.

"Remember, he may have any number of creatures positioned around the building," I whisper in his ear. "Your men must strike hard, and true. A blow to the brain is best, but fire will work as well, if they can obtain it."

Savard nods, then gestures, his hands commanding them as effectively as words. The Gray Circle men split into two groups, fanning out and surrounding the mausoleum. Orange sky light glitters from the points of black iron arrowheads, and I hear the soft creak of bows.

I lift the ash bow and nock an arrow to its string. I draw the feathers halfway to my cheek. Anything less than a shot through the eye will do nothing against a sweetling, I know that, but the thought of facing them with naught but my knife is too daunting.

I take a deep breath, reminding myself that I have made more difficult shots, even as my imagination conjures images of my missing the mark, inflicting an effectual flesh wound. I know if that happens, the creature will be on me before I can draw my blade.

The men move at the count's signal, flowing towards the closed door and flinging it open. Pandemonium erupts.

Men scream as sweetlings spill out of the open door, reeling back as bone blades and hooks whip and flail. The small room beyond the door is packed with their grotesque, unliving bodies, three dozen or more, all waiting for the portal to open. As one they tumble out, no two alike, similar only in their hideousness.

As I watch, two men, then five, then more, stagger and go down, their blood steaming in the cold air. The sweetlings' claws and barbs lash out, coming back coated with blood, which gleams black in the orange skyglow. The sweetlings' dead, opaline eyes catch the hellish light and throw it back in blood-tinged rainbows.

The men fight back, limiting their strikes to the sweetlings' vulnerable eyes and heads. I search for a clear target, frustrated by the close press of friend and foe, then find one on the fringes of the battle: a sweetling, readying itself to leap upon one of my new allies' back.

Without thought, I draw a bead on one milky eye and let the missile fly. It strikes true, burying itself to the fletching in the misshapen skull. An instant later the creature crumbles to greasy ash as the animating spirit within is driven out, succumbing to its second, permanent death.

I draw out a fresh shaft and look for a new target, but just in the few moments of distraction, I see the tide is already turning. The men, despite their exquisite skill, and discipline, are no match for that which cannot easily be killed. The sweetlings care not for any trifling wounds, no matter how damaging or hideous. They are dead, and cannot feel pain. Or fear.

Already, half of Savard's force is down, lying in pools of blood, or in the tangles of their own organs, moaning for succor or mercy. In another moment, even their iron discipline will falter. When that happens, and they turn away, as they must, then all will be killed. It was pure folly to think that men, even men as skilled as these, could stand against such creatures; I should have known better.

Only one thing will stem the tide, and give Savard and his force the time to pull back. To regroup and find a better place to fight, where archers can make a difference.

No! You cannot! You must not! You promised! my sister screams, all too aware of what I am about to do.

"I'm sorry," I whisper, letting the bow slip from my fingers.

I open my secret eye and gaze across the slaughterhouse the graveyard has become. All around, I see the souls of those who have died, standing near their fallen flesh. The melee swirls around, and through, them, but they do not notice. All they can see is the ruins of their stolen lives.

I whisper to them, a song of revenge and desire. Slowly, they turn towards me, focusing their spectral eyes on me. They see me.

Inside, the tendrils of my magic caper and twist, responding to the blood that is all around. I ignore it. That red power is not required for what I am about to do. Still, I feel a familiar thrill, in my chest and between my legs, a sensation I have told myself on so many nights that I do not miss. I cannot endure the lie for a moment longer.

I call out to the shades of the dead, commanding them to lie down in their fallen flesh. To rise once more, and take revenge on their own brothers, the creatures who killed them. To do my bidding as a good and obedient child should, protecting me from the mortal danger that is so very close.

They respond, drifting towards their former shells and lying down, the misty substance of their ghostly bodies melding with the still-warm meat. Seeing it, I laugh, the sound oddly distant, yet so, so familiar.

"Kirin, what—?" Savard begins, turning towards the sound. When he sees my face, he freezes, his scowl becoming something else, something far more primitive and basic.

Fear. Fear shines out of his eyes. Fear, like a beacon to the blood magic, drawing it like a loadstone draws iron filings.

All around us, the dead quiver and twitch, convulsing with the throes of their rebirth. The sound of something tearing, heavy and wet, fills the air, audible even over the screams of the dying and the clash of steel on bone.

"Kirin, no. You can't. No," he says, his voice breaking for the first time.

I laugh again as my dark children rise, shaking off the last steaming shreds of their crimson-streaked birth cocoons, and move to do my bidding.

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CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

With a thought, I fling my children into the fray. Horned, rope-muscled limbs lock with other, equally horrific appendages as the two groups of sweetlings grapple with one another. Moments after they come together, I stagger backwards. My sight dims and my mouth fills with the bitter taste of copper coins and bile as the summoning I have just worked takes its toll. The spirits animating the sweetlings' dead flesh are the returned souls of their former inhabitants, but the terrible will that compels them, which forced them to return, is my own.

Only once before have I attempted such a mass summoning. It was at Fort Azure, on the same morning that I met Lia. The same morning that I called forth the souls of nearly a dozen men, and unleashed them against the Mor.

This summoning, if anything, is even larger, fifteen at least. Just as then, the world seems to recede from me, the feeble light pulling back, down a long, black tunnel, like a candle dropped down a well. I sag, my breath rasping in my throat.

"Kill them," I croak. "Kill them all, and carve us a path to Rath Lan."

Beside me, I can sense Savard, standing in the grip of indecision. As my sight returns, the orange sky brightening slowly, I see him, shifting from foot to foot, watching with his sword in his hand as the two groups of undead warriors clash, ripping at each other with barbs and blades. I gag as nausea twists in my belly, dispelling the seductive slither of the blood magic, and force myself to see what is happening.

My children are outnumbered, at least three to one, but they have advantages. They are fresh, for one, recently summoned, much nimbler than their opponents. Some of Rath's creatures are weeks, possibly months, old, their tissues shrunken and desiccated, literally creaking as they shamble forward. Also, Rath's brood is packed into the stone mausoleum. Against unsuspecting men it was a terrifying and effective ambush. Now that same structure hinders them, forcing them to struggle through the narrow stone doorway and into the teeth of my sweetlings' concentrated defense

The sweetlings are many things—fast, fearless, implacable—but whatever intelligence they possessed in life does not, as a rule, survive the journey back. I smile, a chill, bloodless thing, wooden on my lips, as I watch Rath's force bunched in the narrow portal, emerging in drips and drabs.

No sooner do they do so than my own children descend on them, bone blades scything through the air, reaping a terrible harvest of undead flesh, lopping off spiny limbs and slicing through gristle and bone with appalling efficiency. Their fury, and better position, negates Rath's sweetlings' numeric superiority.

The count, despite his obvious revulsion, is no fool, and uses the opportunity to pull his remaining men back, yelling for them to regroup near the private gate. His assassins disengage smoothly, regaining their composure with admirable swiftness. They drag the wounded behind them, bundles of screaming, bleeding flesh.

Every eye turns to me as they pass, and I see many of them sketching warding gestures: the hooked sign of the Loran Lightbringer; the clenched fist of Ur, the Red Warrior; even the occasional open hand of Shanira, the Lady of Healing.

I ignore them all. If the genuflections of pious fools had the capacity to harm me, then I would already be long dead. Let them wave their hands at me if it makes them feel better.

I throw back my head and laugh then, equally thrilled and terrified as I watch my children struggling

against their kin. Gods, what *have* I done? What will Lia think when she hears of my latest, most complete and total betrayal?

No. I cannot think of that now. Now I must fortify our position, and take advantage of the small respite I have created for us. Across the graveyard, dark shapes still scabble, locking together like crazed animals.

"Archers, ready your shafts," I command, putting actions to words and fitting my own missile to the string. "I fear Rath's force will prove triumphant in the end, but now his trap is sprung, and we know what we face. Remember to aim for the eyes."

All around me, the Gray Circle men draw their own arrows, filling the night with the soft creak of wood and sinew. Even Savard obeys, drawing his own borrowed bow to his cheek and sighting down a long black shaft.

The sounds of struggle die off. I see shapes moving in the orange-black darkness. "Steady. We fire as one, and keep firing as long as we can," I say.

The first sweetling that staggers into the light is horribly savaged, its left arm completely missing. The ribs there are exposed, half of them severed, spilling the useless remains of its unliving organs across the snow-patched ground. Congealing blood sparkles on its exposed muscles and broken tusks.

"Hold!" I yell, dropping my bow and running forward. I reach the sweetling and crouch beside it, just as others, no more than three or four, follow behind.

They are mine, all of them, still wet with the blood of their birth. All have been brutally savaged, none left intact. One pulls itself along on its arms, dragging its upper body along the ground. The severed column of its spine trails along behind, leaving a bloody furrow in the frozen ground, like an exclamation point, or an arrow, pointed directly towards me.

There is only one explanation. "Rath has withdrawn his force. The mausoleum was a distraction; he was never here. He must be regrouping."

"Come on," I yell, springing to my feet. Several of the men move to follow me, responding to the unconscious power of command that threads through my voice.

"Do not follow that order," Savard says softly, and instantly the men all freeze.

"Count, please, we must hurry. Rath is—"

Savard strikes me, a tight, hooked punch to the point of my chin. Stars explode in my eyes as the blow connects, and I feel my knees unhinge, dropping me to the frozen ground. My knees scream as my weight drops onto them. A moment later, I feel the chill edge of his steel against my throat.

My sweetlings react as one, surging towards him, red murder tingeing their opaline eyes.

"No!" I gasp, knowing they cannot move fast enough to kill the count before he can open my throat. They freeze, claws flexing, hungry for his life.

"That's better," Savard whispers. "Now command them to move back."

I obey, ordering them wordlessly to follow his instruction. I am not afraid. If he wanted me dead in punishment for what I just did, he would have already slit my throat. Or so I hope.

Keeping the blade against my neck, he hunkers down beside me. "You ... how could you? They were my men. They were good men," he says, boldly looking into my eyes. Inside, my sister screams in wordless rage.

"If I hadn't called them, you would be choking on your own blood right this moment, and you know it," I hiss back.

The count nods, but does not remove the blade. "Perhaps, madam, but some prices are simply too terrible to pay."

My memory summons the image of my newborn son. So tiny, born weeks early, but perfectly formed nonetheless. I remember watching his expression in the moments after birth, almost comically grave, as his brows drew down in discomfort. Remember the spread of black and red as the delicate blood vessels at the corners of his eyes broke, one by one, sheeting them with crimson. Remember the gout of blood rushing past his tiny mouth, the hot fluid thick with the smell of burning things and the inhuman odor of the Mor.

I killed him. While he was still in my womb, I took into myself the alien blood of my enemy, and somehow that power crossed over into him, ripping his delicate life asunder.

I remember now what I am. Months of happiness, living with Lia, almost made me forget, but now I recall the truth of my life. How could I have forgotten?

The sweetlings are not the monsters here; I am.

"Do not lecture me about prices, sir," I say, the words laced not with the power of command but with something deeper, more primal. Rage. Grief. A sorrow so deep that an ocean of blood could not fill the void in my heart. "I have paid sums that would beggar your imagination. Kill me if your delicate sensibilities demand it, but get on with it. Your indecision disgusts me."

I hold his eyes with mine, readying myself for the kiss of razored steel. If he does it, if he slits my throat, I will only have moments to drive the blood magic into his body. The power of his life, if used fast enough, can save me before my own life essence spills across the barren ground. I remember all too clearly the structures and geography of the neck, back from when I healed a similar wound in Captain Garrett's injured flesh. All I need is the power to do so, power that Savard will handily provide.

A moment later, the steel is taken from my neck. Savard sags, a man defeated, and nods his head.

"Make their sacrifice worthwhile, witch, or I shall take my revenge in your own flesh and blood," he whispers. I nod, unafraid. I know I should fear this man, fear the punishment I know all too well he is capable of, but right now, Savard is the least of my concerns.

Wordlessly, I command the sweetlings to array themselves before us, a tight wedge of bloody flesh and gristle. Their opal eyes shine in the dark.

I see that some are too badly damaged to keep up, and I order their brothers to dispatch them quickly, sending their souls to the Beyond on clouds of greasy ash. When they are done, nine are left who can still fight. Nine against gods only know how many of Rath's own servants.

I smile a grim, humorless smile. Soon enough there will be fresh bodies, I suspect, maybe enough to turn the tide in our favor. If I must, I will not hesitate to call forth more of my children, despite the count's warning and the bone-deep loathing their presence evokes in me. The stakes are simply too high.

"Here! There is a path!" one of the men calls out from behind the mausoleum. We hurry towards the

voice. I pause long enough to scan the ground, reading the tracks impressed in the soft mud. Claws and horns, and what looks like two sets of boots.

"He came this way," I confirm. "Hurry."

We file into the dark woods, the sweetlings breaking trail ahead of us. I lose sight of them almost immediately, but I can hear them, making their way through the densely packed, skeletal trees.

The copse is larger than I would have suspected, tangled and overgrown, the leafless branches above stark against the orange sky light. I move my eyes back and forth, looking for the path's opening in the chancy light, navigating by dead reckoning. Many times, cruel branches lash out, striking me in the face or chest, tangling in my hair. I put up my bow, hanging the weapon aslant across my back, lest it catch and snap the string.

I see a light ahead, the ruddy glow of a fire. The wind turns, bringing with it the smell of burning wood and something else, some sort of perfume, or incense. It is sweet, as sweet as the air from a grave, and as cloying. It rides above the unmistakable scent of death that always clings to the sweetlings.

Before I can open my mouth to whisper a message, I hear the sounds of renewed struggle ahead. The sound of blades impacting flesh and bone is clear in the still air. I hear no screams; it must be the sweetlings, coming together in voiceless fury, tearing at one another.

I hurtle down the path, ducking as tree limbs whip past my face and eyes. Behind me, I hear the sounds of hurrying feet, as the count and his men pace me. The fire's glow grows brighter.

I burst into a clearing, set into the heart of the wood. It is a shallow bowl, gentle, leaf-covered slopes leading down to a small creek or stream. Next to it, I see a large boulder, flat like a table and daubed with pale sigils. A fire burns merrily beside it, set in a deep brass platter. Someone has strung a cloth above the stone, an angled roof of canvas, its corners lashed to the branches overhead.

I see Rath and Eddard, standing beside the rock. A small shape, swaddled in a pale blanket, rests on the stone. Rath croons over it, speaking ancient and terrible words. They hang in the air like bloody runes, echoing unnaturally in my ears.

Between us stand the sweetlings, my paltry nine against over two score of his own. The flickering firelight turns the battle into pure nightmare, a macabre dance of skinless, cavorting bodies. They slash at each other, opening gaping, bloodless wounds.

Without hesitation, I pull the bow from my back and set an arrow to the string. The feathers brush my cheek, even as Savard and his men burst into the clearing behind me.

The motion catches Eddard's eye, and he moves towards us. He raises something, a tall, brass-clad tower shield, aiming its filigreed face our way. I let the arrow slip through my fingertips, the murderous broadhead aimed for Rath's pale neck.

Eddard grunts and raises the shield, catching the arrow on its gleaming face. It ricochets away, spinning into the darkness. I curse and draw a second missile, as the other men nock their own bows.

The sweetlings continue to rip at each other, their struggle blocking our path. As before, Rath's numeric superiority is balanced by my own children's freshness and alacrity. For every one of my own children that fall, I see three of his go down, crumbling instantly the moment the cords of their un-lives are finally severed.

I open my secret eye, gazing down at the tableaux before me. My blood runs cold as I spy the lands

beyond the vale. Something is forming in the air in front of Rath; an absence of light, like a shadow, disembodied and floating. As I watch, Rath beckons, his hand curling back, beseeching something to come to him.

I feel the chill in the air deepen as it steps over the threshold. A shape, vague, but unmistakably human, slides from the black portal. Rath laughs, a delighted sound, and opens his arms as if to embrace it.

My mortal ears hear the sound of a flight of arrows: Savard's men, letting loose a volley. Eddard curses and interposes the polished brass once more, sheltering his master and himself from the storm of steel and wood. Rath gestures to the tiny swaddled shape lying on the stone before him, and the shadow figure slips down, merging itself with it.

"Rath, no! You mustn't!" I scream. Even as I do, I hear the echo of so many others who tried to warn me of the same. I did not listen to them, either; I'm not sure why I think Rath will listen to me now. But I have to try.

He turns and looks at me, a sad smile on his lips. He shakes his head, and whispers something, the wind bearing the word to me across the bowl.

"Sete."

The name of Rath's aunt. The necromancer, dead for so many years. Too many years. Now called back, as I called back my sister, from the lands beyond the vale.

The last of the shadow slips into the still bundle.

The sweetlings, all of them, Rath's and mine both, abruptly stop fighting. They turn, as one, swiveling their ruined faces towards the altar rock. Rath keeps muttering, whispering urgent words to the shape in front of him.

The chill in the air deepens, a cold that has nothing to do with the mortal winter. Even the men feel it, and pause in their reloading, arrows half-nocked. I feel a sensation of falling, my belly crawling inside of me, as I realize we are too late. Too late.

"Kirin, what—" Savard begins.

The pregnant stillness is split by the sound of cracking bone, the noise obscenely sharp in the newly-minted quiet. Every eye drops to the swaddled shape.

It is moving. Rocking back and forth, like an egg about to hatch. As we watch, the pale fabric pushes out, distended as something within, something monstrous and far too large, tries to emerge.

By calling back the soul of his aunt, and placing it in the fossilized body of Napaula's child, Rath has made a *voud'hule*. But this ... this is something else.

"Go. Run," I hiss at Savard.

"No. Men, form on me. Take aim at—"

I turn and grab his shoulders. "Go! It is too late for that. Someone must survive this. You must flee. Now. Before it comes across. I will follow in a moment, but just in case I cannot, I need you to take word of what's happening here back to Lia and her father."

The count scowls, unhappy at this order. He looks into my black eyes, and sees the bone-deep

earnestness there; I see him recognize it. He drops his gaze and nods.

"Fall back, men. Make haste to the gates; we rendezvous there. Fly, and don't look back."

I turn away from him, facing Rath and his beastly child without a backwards glance. I hear the men's departure. It is a distant thing, barely noticed.

The sweetlings remain motionless, as if rooted to the earth, their faces identical in the intensity of their gaze. On the stone, the swaddled figure rocks more violently, the cloth splitting asunder. A shape emerges, a pale, gleaming limb, flexing and shifting. It unfurls and I gasp, recognizing its shape at last.

A hand. Clawed. Four-fingered. Larger than even the largest sweetling's; far, far too large to be contained within such a tiny body.

I bite back a scream as the stone baby cracks open, showing me the mind-wrenching geometries churning within. From a place outside of our mortal plane I see Rath's creature, unfolding itself piece by piece into the world. In my mind, my sister screams, a primal, wordless sound, full of madness and terror.

A second arm joins the first, then the crown of a head. It is horned, crowned with jagged stumps jutting from the beetling brow. The eyes beneath are shadowed, but I catch the gleam of red. Watching it unfold itself makes me want to scream; to cry and gibber, like a madwoman. I feel my hands on my cheeks, nails scrabbling at my eyelids, and force them down, lest I blind myself.

The thing flops out from its birth cocoon, rolling across the frozen ground. It is clumsy, scuttling on hands and knees. *Of course. It never learned to walk, after all. Never learned to walk. Never learned, never learned, neverneverneverneveeeeeaaAAAAGH!!*

I wince as my sister's maddened scream cuts across my brain, a rusty knife of anguish. I drop to my knees, tears streaming down my cheeks, clutching my ears in a futile gesture, trying to silence her.

Movement catches my eye and I look back at Rath's crude altar. I see him kneel beside the feebly thrashing sweetling. It is almost as large as he, with long, long arms depending from wide shoulders. Its legs are short and bowed, more hooves than true feet. The claws on its knees, and on the back of its thighs and calves, churn the earth as it struggles to rise.

The ragged scraps of flesh coating its gray muscles are white. White as bone. White as death.

He puts his hand on the thing's withered cheek and asks, "Sete? Is that you, my lady? I have need of thee."

At the sound of the name the sweetling's head snaps up. The face is placid and serene, the visage of a baby, the overlarge features flattened, oddly undeveloped. Its shining red eyes meet his.

"Welcome back, lady aunt. I have missed y—"

A taloned hand shoots out, wrapping around Rath's throat. The chubby, pursed lips open in a primal hiss, revealing a yawning maw full of needle teeth. They spiral around and around the black cave, running in rows back into its throat; all the way to its unbeating heart for all I know.

Rath screams, or tries to, as the fingers tighten. It emerges as a thin whistle. His face darkens as the sweetling, or the *voud'hule*, or whatever it is now, lifts itself finally to its feet. He clutches its wrist as the thing lifts him up, off the ground.

"My lady ... no ... please..." he gasps.

All around the sweetlings watch, frozen in place. Eddard stares in horror, his shield dangling from nerveless fingers. I take advantage of the distraction and scramble towards the shelter of the trees, throwing myself flat in the rustling leaves, ducking behind a leafless bush.

The creature draws Rath to its face, towards the needle teeth. They open further, wide enough to engulf his entire head. "Sete, please ... it is Rath. Your nephew..." he wheezes.

The creature stops. The teeth part Rath's dark hair, scoring his scalp. I see a trickle of blood, a black rivulet, wending down, past his ear.

It puts him down, then steps back on uncertain legs. Already, it looks more coordinated, more certain of itself. Rath sighs deeply, sagging at the waist, hands on knees for balance.

Eddard clutches his shield, and sidles closer to him. "It is ... can we trust it, master?"

"She remembers me now," he says. "And the child's soul cannot resist my will. All will be fine now."

Fool, my sister hisses. He must have never had children, if he thinks an infant cannot resist an adult's will. Despite the fear and horror of the last few hours, I feel a rueful smile stretching my lips.

And as for Sete, I remember that summons, dragging me back from the Beyond. He may have mastered her soul for now, but she is mad. Too mad to listen. Too submerged in the insanity of the reborn to be reasoned with.

"What is she ... it?" I breathe, softer than a whisper, striving to remain motionless. Eddard has lost sight of me in the confusion of the creature's birth. I pray they will think I ran, like the others.

I do not know. Something unique. A sweetling that is also a voud'hule. Two souls in one undead body. One wise and powerful, trained in the necromantic arts; the other an ancient child, trapped for decades in its mother's flesh.

Rath gazes at the sweetlings, mine and his both, still standing motionless in the ragged clearing. A frown twists his lips. "Come here!" he commands them, pointing to the ground in front of him.

They turn to look at him, but do not move. Tentatively, I do the same, silently ordering my sweetlings to move to his side. They, too, stand frozen, their coiled, unliving bodies tense and ... yes, *expectant*.

Rath turns to the pale, white creature and says, "Tell them to come to me."

It sways, as if it does not understand, but a moment later seems to gather itself. I see it face them, then nod its terrible head.

The sweetlings, all of them, shamble forward, towards Rath and Eddard. A chill stabs my heart as I realize that I can no longer control my children; another has overmastered me. As one they stop before him.

"Very good," he says with a laugh.

He turns to Eddard, and grips the man's shoulder. "Watch my back, lest Savard or that bitch Kirin comes back and tries to shoot me again. One last invocation, old friend, and then we shall bring such terror to the Mor as they have never seen."

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CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

Once again, Rath begins an invocation, chanting words in the harsh, guttural language I heard before. I strive to decipher the words, but they are beyond me. My mistress's art primarily involved the power of the human will over the souls of the departed, not this plaintive beseeching. In that, his working has more to do with the arts of the elementalists.

Only once did I venture into the realm that Rath is now navigating: the ritual I performed, half-understood and by rote alone, which called my sister's shade back into my body. My experiences with her have shown me how little I ever desire to dabble in those arts ever again.

I begin to ask my sister if perhaps she knows the outcome of this latest effort, but before I can even frame the question, Rath is already approaching the end of his working. His voice spirals up, swiftly approaching its climax.

I check the arrow on my string and prepare. If I rise, as I must, to draw the stout bow properly, Eddard will certainly see me. With his shield, it is likely he will block the shot. Once Rath knows I am here, he will command his creatures to come for me. I leave the arrow on the string, waiting for a moment of distraction, of hesitation.

The sweetlings arrayed in the clearing are swaying, moving to some silent music. The *voud'hule* seems unaffected by the ritual, and stands, unmoving, at his side.

All at once, the sweetlings shuffle forward, their claws and blades upraised. The *voud'hule* opens its arms as if to receive an embrace.

Rath's ritual reaches its crescendo, the words tortured, harsh enough to draw blood from his lacerated throat. He reels back, spitting red. Eddard looks towards him, then lowers the shield. He puts one hand on Rath's shoulder, his face concerned.

I rise, breaking cover. My arm draws back the feathers, until they kiss my cold cheek.

The sweetlings reach the hulking form of the *voud'hule*, wrapping their barbed limbs around it.

Rath coughs up a wad of bloody phlegm, spitting on the icy ground; Eddard, shield momentarily forgotten, strives to assist him.

There is a sound, like bones snapping, terribly clear in the still air. I look over at the *voud'hule* and the sweetlings, and what I see freezes me.

The sweetlings' flesh is *merging* with the *voud'hule*, unliving skin and muscle softening and blending like quicksilver, bones flexing, stretching. One, then another, then a third and fourth, are drawn into the body of Rath's creature, sinking into its pale flesh until no trace remains.

As they do, the thing swells, growing larger as the sweetlings' flesh is added to its own. Already it is feet taller, and broader, its limbs swelling.

More and more of my children, and Rath's, approach the *voud'hule*, and are pulled inside. It is eight feet tall now, looming over the men cowering at its feet. Its shoulders, broad as a church's doors, blot out the sky. Its crown of horns twinkles in the tenebrous light.

I cannot look away from the sight. I try. I try with all my might, but the awful vision holds me, like a rabbit in a snare, struggling but caught. Inside, I hear my sister, screaming at me, her urgency cutting across my

brain like a rusted saw.

Take the shot! Take your shot, gods damn you, sister! You must! You must!

Half in a daze, I raise my weapon once more, sighting down the shaft. The barbed head gleams as I take aim. I let the string snap back feeling the rightness of the shot as it whispers past my outstretched hand.

But Eddard is moving, even as the arrow flies. In my delay, he has seen me. "Master!" he screams, shoving Rath to the side, not even bothering with the heavy, clumsy shield.

The arrow that should have hit Rath takes Eddard in the side of the neck, bursting out the other side in a spray of red. He has time for one surprised cough before his knees buckle, pitching him to the ground.

Rath regains his balance and turns, just in time to see Eddard fall. Blood speckles his pale face. He turns, searching the trees for me, but a moment later realizes he is exposed, and ducks back, into the sheltering undergrowth.

I have already fitted a second missile on the string as he tries to hide and I let it fly. To my surprise, the *voud'hule* darts forward, shockingly fast for something so large, and interposes itself between Rath and me. The arrow buries itself harmlessly in its undead flesh.

"You cannot stop me, Kirin!" Rath calls out from his place of concealment. "Nor should you. I can stop the Mor. I can drive them back. You of all people should know what I can do."

I crouch down behind a tree trunk, then fit a fresh arrow to the string, waiting for him to show himself. I remain silent; perhaps I can hide my position for a few moments longer.

On the ground between us, Eddard chokes and gasps, his face covered with blood. He paws at the shaft transfixing his throat. Blood, black as tar in the dim light, pulses down his neck and chest, flowing from torn arteries as he struggles for breath.

"Rath, please, you mustn't do this," I call out, my urge to stop this madness overriding my fear at being found. "Souls that have been called back this long after death are..." I hesitate, wondering if what I am about to say will infuriate my sister. "They are unstable. Filled with hate at their return. They cannot love. All they can do is hate, particularly the person that pulled them back from the Beyond. Please, Rath—"

"You lie!" he shouts. "Sete and I ... what we shared. It was different. Special! I loved her, and she me! You could never understand."

"My sister loved me as well, but still she almost destroyed me when I brought her back. Rath, please, I know what I'm talking about. All she wants is to destroy her summoner, so she can return—"

"No! I do not believe you! I will not! We love each other."

I shift to the left, moving carefully to the shelter of a different tree. I turn my head, trying to fix his position in the dark by sound alone. As I move, the *voud'hule* follows me with its eyes, but does not move forward, remaining between us.

"If she taught you so much, then why did you need me?" I shout, trying to buy myself a few precious moments. As soon as I stop speaking, I resume moving, away from the position I have just revealed.

"It was the blood magic," he says. "I couldn't see the baby any better than you could, and I couldn't risk killing Napaula before I could raise the *voud'hule*. If she died during the procedure, I was worried the baby's soul would be released, and would go Beyond with its mother. I could not have that."

He used you to prolong her life and stop the bleeding, just as he said he would, my sister hisses.

"But for his own reasons," I whisper back.

"I hoped you would understand, Kirin; you of all people. This will not be the end, you know. This power, it was given to us so that we could rule. You must know that. What mortal army can stand against such a thing? It is what our forefathers wanted, I'm sure of it. By denying me, you deny your destiny. Such a waste."

I remain silent, searching for the barest glimpse of him. I am well within range; all I need is a target.

"Kirin, I'm begging you," Rath shouts, frustration ringing in his voice. "Come with us. We need ... I need your talents. The Mor are almost through the Lion's Mouth. The siren is warning people to flee. When they get inside, no mortal agency will be able to drive them out. Thousands will die. Kirin, we can stop them. Sete can stop them, I know it."

His words make a certain kind of sense. Rath's necromantic workings, and mine, are somehow known to the Mor; it must be why they came here. Why they assaulted the wall. Why so many people have died. If that same power could be turned against them...

No. This is wrong. Nobody knows that better than I. The power is too seductive, too enticing. I cannot see the outcome of Rath's actions—glimpsing the future is not one of my gifts—but I can feel the perversion of what he is doing.

"Send Sete back, Rath. Release her. I can't let you bring that ... bring her into the city."

Eddard, still feebly thrashing on the ground between us, chokes one last time, then goes limp, his last breath wheezing out. His eyes stare, open and sightless, his expression more confused than scared.

"Damn you," Rath says, softly, then louder, "damn you, Kirin! You'll pay for that, I swear it!"

He barks a command at the *voud'hule*, and it extends its taloned hand towards Eddard's slumped corpse. Its opal eyes stare down with an intensity I have never seen in the walking dead. I open my inner eye, and see Eddard's soul, kneeling beside his fallen body.

The *voud'hule* beckons, and Eddard turns, as if he can hear it. Ice fills my veins.

The soul responds to the *voud'hule*'s command, slipping back into the dead body. The meat begins to twitch and shift. The sound of tearing cloth and flesh fills the night.

A moment later, a sweetling rips free of the bloody meat, rising on gangly limbs from the shreds of its birth cocoon. It stares at the *voud'hule*, transfixed, rapt.

I stagger as what I am seeing penetrates the fog of fear and panic that surrounds me. The last piece of the puzzle that has vexed me all the way here falls into place, revealing Rath's plan to me in full.

The *voud'hule* is a talisman, a beacon, empowered by the soul of a necromancer. It can summon back the souls of the departed, just as my mistress could. All the legends say so.

But this particular *voud'hule* was also once an infant, jailed in its mother's belly for decades, trapped in a prison of flesh long after its soul should have departed. I had feared such a soul might have grown powerful in its madness over those long years.

I was right. Righter than I knew.

The undead servants raised by Rath's *voud'hule*, compelled by the mingled souls of the necromancer Sete and Napaula's dead child, are *sweetlings*. An army of the shambling dead is frightening enough to contemplate, but a horde of those terrible creatures beggars even my imagination.

The creature spreads its arms, and the sweetling that was once Eddard shambles forward, pressing its freshly resurrected body to its new master's. It is drawn in, like the others, adding its bulk and strength to the *voud'hule*. In response, the abomination's body grows larger, the shoulders broader.

"Kill her, dearest aunt, and make yourself strong," Rath says from the tree line. "Goodbye, Kirin. I hoped you would understand; you of all people."

The *voud'hule*'s thorny head turns at Rath's words, its blood-red eyes fixing on my position. Despite the darkness, and the cover of the black, leafless branches, I can sense that it can see me.

Run, my sister urges me. Run now, and don't look back.

The creature springs forward, its horned feet churning the trampled soil. Its eyes shine with an eager, mad light.

I turn and flee, into the thickest part of the copse.

My bow catches on the grasping fingers of the leafless branches, tangling itself amongst them. I let it slip from my fingers; it will only slow me. Behind me, I hear the *voud'hule* crash into the trees. It is like my own children in that way: it has no wood sense, or subtlety, and knows only brute strength.

I slip through the undergrowth, feeling ahead with my hands. My eyes are useless in the black. I sense a denser tangle off to my left and turn that direction.

I drop to my hands and knees and scramble underneath a thick wall of dead wild rose vines. A thorned branch drags across my cheek, but I barely feel my flesh tear. The thing barrels into the mass of vines with a clatter, and I feel the mass over my head shiver.

The rose is no match for the *voud'hule*'s strength. I hear the vines parting as it flails its limbs. The thorns must be cruelly tearing at it, but I know it does not care. It cannot feel pain.

I scramble out the other side, then cut hard right, towards a dim glow. The rustling and snapping recedes behind me, and for a moment, I allow myself a satisfied smile. Even the *voud'hule*'s strength, it seems, has limits.

For now, my sister warns me. Who knows how strong it will become if it is allowed to ... feed at will. You bought yourself moments only. Don't slow down.

I nod and press on, emerging moments later from the copse. The cemetery spreads out below me, the rows of ranked headstones shining palely beneath the fiery sky.

Behind me, I hear the *voud'hule*, moving once more through the tight mass of trees. Already it is free.

I dash out, across the manicured grass, sprinting with all the speed my legs can summon. I am less than thirty yards from the trees when I hear it emerge. Its taloned feet thump against the frozen ground.

Do not look back, my sister commands me, her voice oddly calm. If you fall, you're done for.

"Thank you ... for reminding me of what I already know," I hiss back. Already my breath grows short; I am woefully out of condition. Too many soft nights in a feather bed. Too many bottles of wine.

The *voud'hule* is gaining on me, I can hear it. I look for cover, but the nearest patch of trees is nearly one hundred yards away. It will be on me in half that distance.

My searching eyes flicker over a shadow in the grass: a depression at the base of a rolling hill. I see a round shape there. The mouth of a drainage pipe, running back into the earth. It is not large, only a few feet tall, but maybe it is big enough.

I cut hard left, pivoting on the ball of my foot, and race towards the pipe. As I near it, my boots squelch through cold mud covered with a layer of ice, then splash into icy water.

The lip of the pipe is as high as my knee, crusted with icicles. The baked clay is covered with the corpses of fallen autumn leaves and countless blown-down twigs and branches. I claw aside the detritus and scramble into the opening.

It is barely wider than my shoulders. Something catches on the pipe's top edge. My arrows and quiver. They will not fit. I curse and slip the strap over my head, casting them behind me with a clatter of wood and iron.

The narrow pipe stinks of rotten things. The thin trickle of freezing water I crawl through numbs my hands and soaks my knees. Inside, it is absolutely black: what little light exists behind me is blocked by my body.

I hear splashings behind me. The thing is at the mouth of my bolt hole. Claws rake across the clay with a noise like children screaming, then the sound of cracking echoes down the shaft. I scramble deeper.

My groping hand slaps against cold, wet slime. The pipe ends at a wider spot; I feel the sides fall away from my shoulders. Desperate, I run my hands along the walls, ignoring the fetid clumps of dead leaves and other, unknowable things, searching for a way out.

I feel several other, smaller pipes, leading away from the narrow oubliette. None are large enough to admit me. The floor is covered with three inches of ice-cold water, above a layer of thick, oozing muck.

Behind me, I hear the *voud'hule* destroying the pipe, tearing it asunder with its claws. I turn around, and see its dim shadow, less than a dozen feet away. It has reached the point where the pipe enters the frozen earth of the hill, and its scabbings slow as it has to cut away the rock-hard ice and soil.

"Kirin?" Rath calls out, from somewhere behind the creature. The scabbling and scraping stop, and the shadow steps aside. "Are you really in there? It must be quite unpleasant. Why not stop this foolishness and come out? Please, milady, it does not have to be this way, I swear it. You will not be harmed; I need you."

"Come inside then, if you need me so badly," I yell back, wincing as my voice echoes from the walls around me.

"Alas, I must decline. Who knows what ... surprises ... you may have in there?"

"Why not be a man and find out?" I taunt. I do not believe he will be foolish enough to come into the reach of my blood magic, but I can hope.

"Come now, do you really think that I'll—"

He stops speaking. Distantly, I hear a new sound, floating through the air, replacing the constant warbling of the siren atop the Arquis Vae. A harsh, bleating noise, a pulse of raw sound, repeating over and over.

It is the siren that has never been used, not in our entire history, but I recognize it all the same, thanks to my training. It is the sound of the breach alarm, something we were told we could never hear.

It means that the Lion's Mouth, the mighty gates that have resisted the Mor's invasion for centuries, are falling. It is too late to stop them. Soon the enemy will be inside, in the streets and amongst the city's defenders.

"Gods, no," I whisper.

"Kirin, we have no time for this! Come out and join the fight!" Rath screams.

I think of Lia, standing before a wall of rampaging Mor. She must be there by now, despite my request to Savard to take her someplace safe. Once she was able to find someone to look after Napaula, she would have rushed straight there, ignoring their commands to stay out of the battle; I know her. Even with her elemental allies and those of her fellow mages at her side, I cannot imagine how they will stand for long.

It is tempting, so very tempting, to submit to the instinct that howls within my breast. To join my blood magic to Rath's power. Months ago, defending Lia and the refugees atop the walls of Dupree Manor, I proved that the Mor are vulnerable to my red talent. This time, I shelter no fragile life within my body, which might be harmed by its use. The risk, and sacrifice, are purely my own. I shift forward, ready to crawl out of my bolt hole.

Did your son's death teach you nothing after all? my sister whispers.

The words stop me like a noose around my neck. Unbidden, his face comes to me, recalled in perfect detail. I remember the way his shade's milk-white eyes stared into mine from the other side of the Vale, filled with love and a terrible, bottomless hunger. Remember the feeling of absolute certainty that what returned from his shattered body would truly be an abomination, damning me in some irredeemable way, forever cursed in the eyes of men and gods both.

I stop, gagging on tears, trying not to vomit.

"I ... cannot. I will not be a part of this," I choke out, pulling myself deeper into the stinking hole. Sobs rip through me. What did I almost do?

Outside the pipe, I hear Rath curse under his breath, the words, if not the intent, clear.

"Then ... I will go. Someone must face them, since you will not," he says, his voice filled with a fanatic's passion. "But I warn you: do not interfere in what will come, milady. When the Mor are gone, I will settle all of my old scores. If you are wise, you will leave the city now, before I can solidify my power. Before I can find you. When I see you again, I will certainly kill you."

"Do what you must; I will," I whisper back, uncaring if he hears me or not.

The shadow moves away, the thumping footfalls receding swiftly. In my icy, stinking womb, I wrap my filth-smeared hands around myself, and weep for everything I have lost, and for what is to come.

I run through the abandoned streets, my breath a furnace in my chest. My legs are distant, aching things, numb from wet and cold. I stumble, almost falling, but somehow manage to keep my feet beneath me.

Ahead, in the distance, a sound reaches me. An unholy blending of the screams and war cries of countless men and women, mixed with an eerie, high-pitched warbling. It takes me a moment to identify the voices of the Mor, raised in a ululating chorus unlike anything I have ever heard them utter.

It sounds like ... exultation. Yes, that's it. A savage joy I did not know they could exhibit. The sound chills my bones, turning them into bars of frozen lead.

Overtop it all, the breach alarm atop the Arquis Vae calls out, again and again and again, splitting the night with its frantic, idiot scream.

Fires have broken out ahead of me, *inside* the walls now, I can tell. The light they cast is bright enough to read by; I can feel the heat on my face.

"Gods, we're too late," I mumble.

Still, you must try, my sister replies. I nod, not needing her encouragement, but thankful for it nonetheless.

I am still a mile or more from the Lion's Mouth when I encounter the first refugees. They are a trickle at first, which soon swells to a mighty flood. I wade into the mob, moving against the press of bodies hurrying away from the mayhem. Rich and poor mingle freely, silk and satin pressed against tattered homespun and wool. At this moment, all are equal. All are victims. All are prey.

A flash draws my eye, dazzlingly bright, followed moments later by a peal of ear-splitting thunder. A second follows, then a third. The wind, already stiff, changes direction, rising to a gale in heartbeats.

The elemental mages are fighting back. Not for the first time, I wonder if Lia is amongst them, or if she has already fallen.

No. I cannot think of her, not like that. I push aside the vision of her in my imagination, torn limb from limb, her sky blue eyes wide and sightless, filled with accusation. Where were you when I needed you? they seem to shout. What were you doing while I laid down my life for you?

No. No. NO. I must not. I must think. Must be alert. I might only have one moment to act, when Rath is vulnerable. I must strike, as hard as I can, before he can command his creature to send me to the damnation I so richly deserve.

I push past the last of the fleeing people, and emerge into the suddenly-clear street. Bodies lie scattered on the cobblestones. They are ripped asunder, shrunken and diminished, the sad remnants of the sweetlings' birth cocoons.

One of them is small, no larger than a child. A pale shape, a sad, dirt-stained doll, is clutched in her perfect, pale hand.

My scream fills the night, driving back, for just a moment, the cacophony all around me. It rises, higher and higher, until I fear my throat will burst asunder. I sag to the stones.

Get up! Get up! The bodies still steam; they are fresh. He was just here. He must still be nearby. Damn you, sister! Get on your feet and do something!

The words goad me to rise. I stumble forward once more, down the center of the street, as the skies above me are torn once more by wind, fire and lightning.

My hands grope at my belt, but my scabbard is empty. Somewhere, in the woods or scrambling through the fetid pipe, I lost even my knife. I am completely unarmed.

What good is a blade, or a bow, against such a thing? my sister reminds me. I shove aside my furious reply. She is only trying to help. Gods know I've made a mess of things in lack of her wisdom.

Hands empty, I move towards the sounds of the battle ahead.

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CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE

The swollen bellies of the clouds overhead flash pale blue and white, painted by the restless flicker of lightning. Embers swarm upwards from countless fires, filling the ash-gray sky with orange stars, which rain down on my bent head as black cinders. The stink of burning wood and charred meat fills my nose as I hurry towards the cacophony ahead.

I emerge from the smoke-filled streets into the wide square at the head of the Gold Road between the palace gates and the smoking remains of the Lion's Mouth. I look up at the once-proud portal, and gape in amazement.

The mighty gates have been cast down, reduced to rubble. The strange, seamless stone that formed them has been rent asunder, burnt and blasted by the Mor's unearthly fury. Chunks of the shattered gates lie strewn across the cobblestones. Bars of ribbed, twisted metal jut from the blackened hunks like bones. Some still glow, fitfully, the air above them rippling with heat.

The square, almost a quarter of a mile across at its widest point, is filled with figures. Closer to the yawning portal are wave upon wave of hulking, gray forms, much larger than men. Their four-armed bodies are packed shoulder-to-shoulder, hundreds—no, *thousands*—of them, waving their powerful upper claws in a clacking display of might. The Mor are inside.

Facing them are the remains of the wall's defenders, countless thousands of armored men and women. I hear the shouts of the sergeants and captains as they struggle to form their warriors into orderly ranks.

I look up, to the top of the palace wall, and see rows and rows of defenders, all clad in Imperial maroon and purple. Their polished steel helmets and breast plates glitter, almost gaily, in the chaotic light. I know they will not open the gates and join the fight. They are tasked with one thing and one thing only: to defend the emperor at all costs, and to sell their lives, if they can, in exchange for his.

Ranked behind the warriors in the square stand the mages, their robes gleaming like jewels. There are so few of them, no more than five score. I suck my breath in. There should be more of them, three times that number, at least. Where are the rest?

A herald sounds the call for an ordered retreat on his horn, and the human fighters fall back just as a wedge of Mor surges into their ranks, splitting them as easily as a spade through soft earth.

A knot of red-clad pyromancers hurries forward, advancing on the Mor's left flank. The men guarding them are huddled close, their shields overlapping, spears bristling through the gaps like steel porcupine quills.

The elementalists raise their arms, calling out to their allies in the guttural language of the fire spirits. All around the square, I see the fires twisting, against the wind, bending themselves into strange shapes. They coalesce, concentrating into balls of white-hot flame, bright as tiny suns.

A moment later, a menagerie of fantastic beasts forms from the spheres. Each stands as tall as a house, their towering bodies comprised of living flame: an ox. A horse. A wolf. Something that looks like a bird with trailing tail feathers of dark vapor. And, even larger than all the rest, the lion, the symbol of the Empire, with teeth and claws of molten red and mane of sparks and smoke, roaring with the sound of a forest fire. It rears, and plunges into the mass of inhuman attackers.

Several of the pyromancers sag to the stones and are assisted by others. I see them, still gesturing to their creations, striving to control and direct them, even as the summoning they have just performed takes its

toll.

With so much fire all around, the elemental spirits are mighty. Mighty. They crash into the Mor ranks like a burning hurricane, scattering the lumbering creatures like a child's tin soldiers.

The Mor fight back, with the power of their shaman-empowered blades and the might of their claws, rending the fire beasts asunder, ignoring their smoldering armor and burning harnesses. Some form into wedges behind the smaller shamans, claws outstretched to rest on the shoulders of the warrior before them, somehow focusing their power into the body of the Mor at the formation's tip.

The magic-workers strike with their ennobled weapons, staffs of iron, glowing sullen red in the darkness. When they do, there is a flash of light, and the fire creatures reel back, the flames of their bodies blasted apart.

I look all around the square, my eyes seeking Rath and his abomination. I do not see him. Where is he? He should have been here by now. I run towards a lamp post set into the stones at the square's perimeter. I need a higher vantage.

A rumble from the clouds overhead gives me pause. I look up, and see tendrils of azure lightning flashing from cloud to cloud, twisting like serpents. On the Mor's left flank, I see a line of white-clad aeromancers, hands upthrust, their voices raised in keening cries.

I feel a tickle, and see the hairs on my arms standing erect. The tang of summertime storms wafts across the battlefield, cutting through the stench of burning wood and flesh. A premonition warns me, and I drop to the stones, risking trampling, but knowing what is to come.

Seven mighty bolts, brighter than the noonday sun, lance down from the angry skies, striking simultaneously into the heart of the Mor. The boom that follows an instant later is louder than anything I have ever heard, anything I could have imagined, a noise beyond deafening. I feel the very air sucked from my chest as it rolls over me, crushing me down into the unyielding stones.

I blink past stinging tears, my vision sheeted with branching afterimages like leafless trees, and see that most of the human defenders, as well as many of the Mor, have been knocked flat. In the center of the Mor ranks are seven black craters, ringed with charred bodies. Those at the blast's center are clearly dead, their stone-hard flesh split and peeled, exposing the blue-tinged meat beneath. It smokes and steams, and a smell wafts over me, like cooked shellfish and brimstone.

The pyromancers' beasts do not hesitate, and use the distraction to wreak fresh havoc on their unresisting foes, cuffing the hulking warriors with their burning paws and grabbing them up in their flaming mouths.

I scramble to my feet and sprint towards the white-robed mages. The men guarding them allow me to pass.

"Lia!" I scream, then again, "Lia!"

"Kirin!" The call is weak, muffled by my stunned ear drums, but as clear and welcome as a drink from a glacial stream.

Then I am in her arms, and she in mine, her body pressed against me almost painfully tight, thrumming like a plucked bow string. I bury my face in her chestnut hair, eyes screwed shut against stinging tears. She murmurs something in the sibilant language of the air spirits into my ear, her breath warm against the side of my neck.

"Thank the gods, you're alive," I whisper back. I feel her nod.

"Kirin, where is Rath?" she demands a moment later, pulling back. She still wears the tattered, second-hand clothes and dark gray cloak from earlier in the night, a time that feels like a hundred years ago to me now. She has tied a strip of white cloth around her temples. It shines in the ruddy light, pale against her dark curls.

I shake my head. "I don't know. I lost him in Griffin Park. He should be here by now. Lia, he's done something terrible."

She looks into my eyes, then nods. "Whatever it is, we will stop him."

I swallow past the lump in my throat and nod back, squeezing her shoulders.

"Where are the others? Where are the other mages?" I ask her.

She drops her eyes. "Many have fallen. Or have been forced to withdraw," she says softly.

"The geomancers are regrouping," she continues. "They suffered terribly when the gate was thrown down. So many of them were pouring their power into it, trying to keep it strong. When it broke, they felt its pain like wounds in their own bodies. They will need time to recover."

"My father sent the hydromancers into the City, to help with the fires. If the Mor get past us, what you see here will be nothing..." She gestures to the flames already taking hold in the venerable structures all around. "They have orders to regroup at the river, should this last bulwark fall, and use the waters there to flood the streets and drown as many of them as they can."

"Can't the fire mages help put them out?"

"They can, but father thought they would be more useful here, in combat. I agree."

The knot of aeromancers advances, the strong helping the exhausted. I trot beside Lia, pausing only long enough to scoop up a fallen soldier's sword. It feels good in my hand, its weight reassuring, even though I know it will be useless in the face of any real attack.

Humans and Mor alike have regained their feet, and stagger into fresh, if ragged, lines. All the while, the fire beasts continue to harass the enemy's flank, moving forward to strike, then pulling back before the shamans can bring the concentrated might of their wedges to bear.

"Why are you here, Lia?" I call after her. "I told Savard to send a man to find you. To take you someplace safe."

That stops her. She turns on her heel and glares at me, lightning flashing in her eyes. Some of the other wind mages look at us, frowns scoring their grimy faces.

"Yes, they found me," she says. "I refused to go with them. Did you really think I would cower in some dark hole while my father fights? While *you* fight? I thought you knew me better than that."

Despite everything that has happened, I feel a grin blossoming on my face. Lia's certainty, and her righteous anger, radiate from her like heat from a blacksmith's forge. It feels good. So very, very good.

Someone taps me on the shoulder. I turn and see one of Savard's men. The Gray Circle assassin looks haggard, his eyes red-rimmed, nestled amongst lines of soot and grime. There is blood on his mantle, I can smell it, the burnt-fish stench of the Mor.

"Where is your master?" I say, interrupting whatever he was about to say. "I need to tell him that I—"

"You lost sight of him," he says. "We know. He was spotted nearby, headed this way. He has ... others with him."

He does not say who, or what, accompanies him, but we both know. I have seen the shriveled husks strewn along the streets.

"Where's the old woman? Where's Napaula?" I bark, as the aeromancers stop again, beginning a fresh chant. This time, Lia strides unhesitatingly to the forefront, standing shoulder-to-shoulder with half a dozen others and adding her voice to theirs.

"Someplace safe," he calls back. "She is ... still alive."

I do not ask him for details. Even if he knows them, I do not want to hear them. Maybe later, but not now.

Just as the air mages' newest chant is reaching its crescendo, a new set of screams reaches my ears. I turn towards them; they are coming from *behind* me. Before I can make out the source of the disturbance, someone shouts, "Ware the lightning!" and I drop to my knee, hands pressed tight over my still-ringing ears.

But I do not look away, and that is why I see them first, illuminated in every gruesome detail by the lightning's merciless glare, before Savard's man or anyone else.

Rath. And ... something else. A half-skinned, bone-white creature, nine feet tall, striding close behind him.

Despite the titanic clap of thunder, many of the soldiers do not pause in their flight, and are knocked back, staggering, as the wall of noise crashes over them. I see Rath stagger as well, flinching away from the sound like a slap, but he manages to retain his footing.

"There!" I scream, rising. Despite my attempt to protect my ears, the thunder has once again deafened me, filling my head with a high-pitched squeal. I know no-one can hear me, so I point, gesturing broadly. The Gray Circle man follows the gesture, and I see his eyes go wide.

Rath shakes his head like a horse with a bee in its ear, then looks out across the wide square. I glance back, and see that the Mor formations have once again been scattered, with rings of cooked bodies surrounding blackened craters. I see Lia, half in a swoon, fall back into the arms of a fellow aeromancer, exhausted by the summoning she has just performed.

I turn my attention back to Rath, in time to see him raise up his arms. Even from a distance, I can see the look of mad joy on his face; see the lunatic grin that stretches his mouth. He beckons, and from behind him comes a skittering mass of darkness, shot through with gleams of bone white and blood red.

Sweetlings. Ten. Twenty. Fifty. More. More than I have ever seen. More than I ever thought I would see, a seething mass of rope-muscled limbs and jutting spines, flowing like a black tide around the *vod'hule*. I don't doubt that summoning so many would have struck me dead.

Such a summoning would have killed Rath, too, my sister whispers. It is his creature—it can call the sweetlings too, remember. Sete is not constrained by the limitations of flesh and blood, and can call as many minions as there are freshly-fallen souls to compel.

The sweetlings move forward, so fast, hopping or running as best fits their twisted anatomy. The sound

their talons make against the stones, *skitter-clack-skitter, skitter-clack-clack*, rises clearly over the sudden silence that falls over men and Mor alike.

At their rear, the *vod'hule* raises its flayed arms, taloned hands outthrust. A new sound is heard: bodies flopping in jerks and spasms as lifeless muscles writhe and twist, curving spines into shocked question marks before the skin and muscle split asunder, revealing the nightmare form of yet another sweetling.

There are hundreds of human bodies in the square. Hundreds. Scattered amongst scores of fallen Mor. All begin to move—all—as their souls and mangled flesh are returned to a parody of life by Sete's impossible will.

For the Mor, the transformation is even more painful to watch. Stony armor flexes and stretches and, lacking the elasticity of human skin, finally bursts asunder from within as taloned paws claw their way into the reeking winter air. Mor blood sprays out in steaming, blue-black fans as Sete's brood tears its way into the world.

Just as when I summoned a sweetling from atop the wall, these new children are smaller than a full-grown Mor, yet still larger than a man, their gnarled shoulders supporting four mismatched arms. Spikes bristle from joints and seams, cruel blades of rock-hard bone, meant to rend and tear and catch.

Each looks out into the night through a pair of red-tinged eyes, glowing with madness from beneath jutting, lumpen brows. Most have no mouths, but a few open and close rude triangular flaps filled with needle teeth, lashing the air with long, barbed tongues.

The Mor reaction is swift and unequivocal. As one, they turn from their mortal foes and the beasts of flame and fire, to face this new threat. Every Mor voice is raised in a single, ear-piercing shriek, a sound of pure hate, pure terror. Their careful ranks and wedges scatter as they run forward, ignoring the human warriors still fighting at their flanks and rear.

I watch, dumbfounded, as our foe casts away anything resembling organization, or cooperation, dissolving before my very eyes from an army to a savage mob. All they have now is the strength of their loathing and fear. It is as if the very sight of the sweetlings has driven them mad.

They charge with the sound of a landslide, horned hooves ringing on the stones as they hurtle into combat. The sweetlings, their ranks swelling with every passing second, meet them without pause.

The two forces meet, crashing together like waves against rocky cliffs. Instantly, it is chaos. Mor warriors flail about with their claws and burning blades, crushing and stamping until their foes are reduced to piles of twitching gristle, which then crumble into greasy ash. Shamans wield their staffs and iron bars, whirling them amongst clouds of sparks, burning the souls from the surging undead.

But the sweetlings are so many, every one almost, if not more than, a match for the Mor they face. And they have the advantage, for every Mor that falls is instantly a vessel for one of Sete's new soldiers. As the Mor weaken, her brood grows in strength and power.

"Kirin, come on!" someone screams, yanking me backwards. I blink, only realizing a moment later that it is Lia. So riveted was I by the carnage before me, and by the grisly rebirth occurring all around, that I did not hear her.

"I ... What...?"

"Kirin, we must fall back. *Now*. To the gates of the Imperial Palace. We have lost more than half of the wall's defenders, and must regroup. If the Mor get past Rath's army—"

"They won't. Few will survive this massacre, but those who do will tell others what happened here," I say, shivering as the words pass through me like razors, as sure and certain as a gods-given prophecy. Images fill my mind, vivid as a fever dream, impossible to ignore. They compel me to speak, tearing the words from my aching throat.

"The ones who escape will go to the hidden places, deep underground. There, they will call up an army the likes of which we have never seen. Every Mor that lives ... every one, young and old, warrior and shaman, hunter or hearthtender ... all will leave their homes and cities, and will not stop until they have scoured every last trace of men from the face of the world."

I blink as the vision of certainty breaks. The chill sensation leaves me, all at once, leaving me exhausted. Trembling, I sag to the stones.

"What ... What do you..." Lia stammers.

I look up at her, and feel a chill wetness on my cheeks. I wipe my tears, and my hand comes away red. I am crying tears of blood. I shake my head, splattering the snow with ruby drops, trying to push aside the last remnants of the vision.

"We must regroup, yes," I say, my voice shaking only a little. "Immediately. But it is not the Mor we need to fear now."

"But they are still so many—" Lia begins.

"They are dead. They just don't know it yet," I respond, shocked at the coldness in my own voice. "They have no choice but to fight, and so they will be destroyed. When they are, when they finally break, we'll need to be ready for *them*."

I point to the seething mass of sweetlings, and to Rath and his creature.

Lia follows the gesture, her brows knitting together. A moment later, she nods. Her eyes are hard and clear, and unafraid, and I feel my heart give a desperate lurch as a surge of love and admiration passes through me.

"Come on, then, we have to go," she says, spinning on her heel.

"Where?"

"To talk to my father."

* * * *

Argus Cho stands at the rear of the mortal lines, close to the bronze and oak gates that shelter the Imperial Palace. He is surrounded by mages, milling knots of color: the brown of earth and the blue of water, white of air and red of fire. Cho himself wears his own colors, the charcoal and gold greatcoat that I first saw him in, so many brief weeks ago.

"Father!" Lia calls, pushing past the knots of elementalists. "Father, I must speak with you!"

Argus looks away from the men and women before him, leaders all of their various colleges, if the ornate insignia on their robes are any indication, and scowls.

"Lia. Gods above and below, I have a counterassault to plan, girl. What are you—" His eyes find my face, and I feel the intensity of his electric blue stare. Lightning and dancing flame shift and roil in those eyes, evidence of his mastery of both air and fire elemental magics.

"What is she doing here? Are you mad?" he cries, stepping forward. Argus reaches back, a nimbus of blue flame blossoming from his right hand. Snowflakes pop into steam all around him, and I feel a deadly warmth on my cheeks.

"No!" Lia shouts, stepping before me.

"Stand aside, Lia! I have a report from Savard about her."

"No, Father," she says again, not moving. "This is not her fault. It is Rath of the house of Lan. This is his handiwork."

"The count tells me you're a necromancer, girl," Argus calls out. As soon as the words are uttered, the mages surrounding us step back. I see flames and lightning in almost every eye, feel the ground trembling beneath my boots.

"I am. Was. I..."

Words fail me as, deep inside, the blood magic whips and flails, desperate to escape. To reach out and pierce the bodies of my enemies, ripping their lives out by their crimson roots. I screw shut my eyes, willing it with all my might to remain inside of me.

A moment later, I feel it relent, subsiding, just a bit. But enough. I open my eyes, and look at the ring of my executioners. I see no pity there; only judgment. With a word, Cho will command them to unleash the primal fury of their elemental allies.

"Go," I say to Lia, pushing her aside.

"Kirin, I will not abandon you. I—"

"Go!" I scream at her. "He has made his decision, and I will not have you pay the price for my weakness."

Lia steps back, daunted by the vehemence of my response, then shakes her head. She returns to my side, and turns to face her father.

"I will not. Even after all you have done, it would be wrong to leave you."

I swallow my frustration, and relent, even as inside I give a secret cheer. My sister echoes it, her delighted laugh rising in my mind like the dawning sun, warming me from within.

I am not alone.

"Lia ... daughter ... please. Do not do this. We cannot afford to be divided—"

"Then stop fighting the woman who can help us and listen for once in your life," she snaps, cutting him off. The mages surrounding us mumble, their faces surprised. Argus Cho blinks, his mouth hanging open for a moment. He scowls, but I see something else beneath his irritation, an expression of rueful pride.

"All right," he says, his voice softening, "tell me why I should."

"Master, we have no time for this," an aeromancer in an ornate, sapphire-trimmed robe says. "We should be organizing—"

"Then go and organize! Just leave me be for a moment. I will listen to what she has to say, and then I will make my decision. Go now!"

The elementalist backs away, nodding, his face darkening with fury. All around, the other elemental mages nod and busy themselves with their preparations.

"Now then," Argus Cho says in a dangerously soft voice, leveling his lightning-filled gaze at me, "tell me why I shouldn't burn you down where you stand."

Once I begin speaking, I find it difficult to stop. There is so much. I tell him of my time on the wall, and of my healing of Captain Garrett with the power of the blood magic. Of the way it changed him, opening his mind to the thoughts of the Mor.

I tell him about my power to raise the dead, describing the sweetlings. Lia nods along, silently confirming everything I say, forestalling the questions I see growing in his eyes.

Then I speak of Rath Lan; our first meeting at Lia's welcome home party, then our second in the bazaar, on the same day I saw the sweetling. I tell Argus about returning to the marketplace, after being dismissed from my post atop the wall, and recount how the urchin Rolf and his boys led me to the manor house.

I struggle to explain Rath's theory of the Mors' silent communication, and how he believes that it is this talent, not the blood magic, that results in the creation of sweetlings. From there, I find I cannot avoid speaking of Napaula any further.

When I speak of the old woman, and her child, I feel tears in my throat, thick and choking. I struggle to finish, to remain concise and calm, even as I feel my eyes yearning to return to the sight of the battle still raging across the square. I do not go into detail about the *vod'hule*—it is enough that he knows it is the creature, not Rath Lan, who is summoning the sweetlings.

When I am done, Argus takes a moment, staring down at the cobblestones and tugging at the strands of his black beard. After a time, he looks up. I see that the fire in his eyes has subsided to the dim red of banked coals.

"You have this old woman in custody?" Argus asks the Gray Circle man.

He nods. "She is someplace safe."

He turns to Lia. "And you saw all of this?"

"I saw the birth. And what Kirin did to ... spare the old woman." She swallows, but does not tell him how I stole away a portion of her own life to bolster Napaula's flagging strength.

Across the vast courtyard, I hear a new sound. The Mor are wailing once more, the piping sound twisting on itself like the thrashings of a beheaded snake. Once again, visions intrude on my thoughts, emotions rolling over me like crashing surf. Fear. Terror. Anguish. A terrible, soul-deadening resignation.

"The Mor are losing," I croak, my mouth and throat dry with the depth of their emotions. "Soon they will break, and the few remaining survivors will flee. When they do, this chapter of the war will end, but a new will begin."

"What must we do then?" Argus demands.

I look out, over the churning mass of Sete's ever-growing army. There are thousands now, many spawned from the shattered flesh of the dead Mor warriors.

A chill settles over me, a cold as intense as that at the bottom of a freshly-dug grave.

Gods help me. "I don't know."

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CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX

The Mor keep fighting, long past the time that any human army would have broken and run, but nothing that lives, no force that draws breath, or that bleeds when cut, can stand forever against that which does not. By the time the inevitable occurs, they are truly decimated, reduced to a force one fifth the size of the army that shattered the gate protecting the Lion's Mouth.

We all know when the end comes. The remaining warriors and shamans send up a final cry, a sound of pure, distilled dismay. It echoes in the ear, and mind, of every man and woman in the square.

I see hardened warriors clutching their heads, tears streaming down their faces as they try to shut out the weird and terrible cry. Others crumple to the stones, shocked into unconsciousness by the unexpected force of the Mor's combined terror. We are still reeling as the remnants of the attacking army turn for the open gates and the safety of the plains beyond.

By now the number of sweetlings cannot be measured. They carpet the vast expanse of the square, a seething mass of rope-muscled shoulders and waving, blood-smearred limbs, which moves and shifts, with one mind, like a flock of wheeling birds. The Mor, even as puissant as they are, are no match for their unliving determination.

The last of the Mor cry lances through my mind, impaling me on a spike of crystalline thought, jagged and painful as a spear. I drop to my knee, trying to shut out the agony. My sister keens along, her own cries of pain mingling with the fading mental shriek. Distantly, I hear someone—Lia—calling my name.

"I'm all right," I gasp, clutching the flagstones with clawed fingers, trying to balance myself against the heaving earth. "I'm all right. Keep going. Stay with your father."

"They will wait," she says, helping me back to my feet. Her hand is shaking, but it seems as if the scream has not affected her as badly as it did me. I stagger beside her and we lean against each other. Together, we push towards the small knot of color that marks the mages' position.

There are so few. Less than a hundred, surrounded by the remaining defenders from the Armitage. I do a quick calculation, splitting the line before me into halves, then halving the remainder twice more, before counting individual figures and multiplying that number by eight. It is a useful trick, taught to me by the Lord Commander Mermont, on the day we faced the Mor at Gamth's Pass.

The result is not encouraging. All told, the human defenders number less than three thousand. All are armed with spears and swords, armored in the best mail Imperial smiths can forge, but I know firsthand the sweetlings' uncanny strength and determination. A sweetling raised from a human shell is faster and stronger than any human warrior, bristling with blades and spikes of rock-hard bone, able to ignore even crippling wounds. One raised from a Mor body is stronger still.

I look out across the courtyard and attempt to count them, but it is impossible. Their skinless, rope-muscled bodies, slicked with red or bluish-black blood, merge visually as they shift and move. I try again, splitting the group into a smaller unit and multiplying by a higher number. The result shocks me.

Five thousand. If I am right, if I have not miscounted, or done the figures wrong in my head, we face five thousand undead warriors, outnumbering us almost two to one.

You did not miscount, my sister whispers. She sounds as appalled by the figure as I am. *Oh, Kirin, what will we do?*

"Stand as long as we can and try our best to kill Rath and his *vod'hule*. What else can we do?"

I think of the child who began all this, Napaula's son, ripped from its warm, sheltering womb after so many decades. The thought evokes stinging tears, and I feel my face screw with sympathetic anguish. "He must be so scared. So confused by everything that has happened. Despite its terrible power, it is an innocent in all of this."

It may be, but Sete, and Rath, are not. Your feelings are noble, but do not let them get in the way of doing what you must.

I bend and snatch up a bow, prying it from the fingers of a fallen soldier. He will not need it. Orange sky light gleams off its polished belly. I shake my head and look out, across the fleeing backs of the Mor, to where the *vod'hule* stands at Rath's side, swaying with concentration—or rapture—as the army of sweetlings gives chase.

"What does she say?" Lia asks, helping me the last of the way towards the mages. She knows what it means when I whisper to myself.

"She reminds me of my duty," I reply.

She nods. "Good. It's about time someone did."

The barb strikes home, digging deep. I grit my teeth and force myself to remain silent. I know she punishes herself as much as she does me; it is her way.

"I won't let you down again," I tell her, giving her shoulder a squeeze.

She looks at me, the lightning clearing in her eyes for a moment, the veil of flickering light parting just long enough for me to see the girl—no, the woman—behind it. She is scared. So scared. I can almost hear her thoughts. Almost taste the fear that she will be found wanting in the final hour. That she will disappoint her father, or me, at some crucial time.

"You will not fail to do what needs to be done, I know it," I say, leaning forward to kiss her cold cheek.

She hugs me to her for a moment, her face pressed to mine. I feel her nodding, feel the chill wetness of a tear on my own cheek. Mine or hers, I know not.

We break apart, and I see the lightning return to Lia's eyes, cocooning her in the armor of her elemental power. Lia the woman, the person I love, retreats, submerged in the depths of Lia the elemental. I do not know which one scares me more.

Together but apart, we push through the last distance separating us from the mages, and Argus Cho.

* * * *

"Rath's army has been called up and is being controlled by the *vod'hule*," I say, turning my head so I can look into the many pairs of eyes arrayed around me. "If we can kill it, the army will lose its anchor, and will be driven away. The sweetlings are animated by the souls of the dead, but are kept here by the will of the summoner, and cannot remain if that force is removed."

"What about killing Rath?" a pyromancer at Argus's side asks. She is older, a whip-thin fifty or so, with flaming red hair and deep-set emerald eyes. Flames lick in her gaze, making it glow.

I shake my head. "I'm not sure. The *vod'hule* is not a minion like the sweetlings. It is..." I grope for the word, then shrug my shoulders, unsure how to describe it.

"I have never heard of anyone trying to do what he has done. A *vod'hule* is an artifact, a tool or object, suffused with the soul of a powerful necromancer. I have never heard of it being created from the body of one of the undead. It is ... unprecedented, as far as I know. Killing Rath very well might release Sete's soul, destroying it, or it might simply free it from whatever control he holds over it."

Argus scowls and shakes his head, his displeasure obvious for all to see. "If you have the chance, take him down by whatever means are necessary," he says to the assembled mages. Behind them, I see the commanders of the army nod as well. The warriors will take their orders from the mages in this fight; they know all too well that they are grossly overmatched, and that without the slim hope offered by Argus's one hundred elementalists they would have no hope at all.

I look out, across the courtyard, to where the last of the Mor are making their final retreat out the shattered gates. Sweetlings stream after them, worrying at their rear lines. The Mor do their best to withdraw elegantly, forming wedges with shamans at their tips and wheeling in formation. It does not help them; Rath's army is so vast it simply flows around and past them, entombing the formations.

The wedges bring awesome fury to bear, empowering the shamans at their tips with the combined might of two dozen Mor. Iron staves shine with heat, brighter than magma, scattering sparks as they scythe through the seething undead.

Everywhere the Mor fire strikes, it leaves behind shattered, burning husks, which instantly crumble to dust. But the shamans can only reach so far, can only strike at so many enemies. In response, the sweetlings shift, attacking the wedge at its flanks or rear, shredding the tightly-packed formation and breaking its power.

Eventually, the wedge collapses, its power evaporating like morning fog as the Mor break ranks, reforming into small knots of desperate resistance. Their unity gone, they are swiftly drawn down, disappearing beneath the tide of gray lifeless flesh.

"Should we wait?" Lia asks.

"No," Argus Cho commands, speaking loudly so the other commanders can hear him. "Attack them now, while they are distracted. Captain, you have your orders."

"Aye sir. If we can get close enough, my archers will find the target," the commander of the wall's defenses says, swallowing. I can read the bone-deep weariness in his eyes. The brown orbs are ringed with soot and ash, their whites bloodshot from the smoke in the air. As I watch, I see him push aside the fatigue, straightening his spine and staring across at Rath's host with a raptor's gaze.

His eyes slide to mine, and he nods at the bow in my hand. "Can you use that?" he asks.

"Few are better," Lia replies for me. I feel a smile warming my face.

"Then you're with me. We'll line up between the infantry and the mages." The sergeant hands me a battered, half-full quiver. "This is all the ammunition we have, so make your shots count."

I nod and take the missiles. There are plenty of arrows lying scattered in the courtyard, but many are doubtless broken and bent, and sorting through them in the heat of combat is simply a faster way to get killed.

I turn to Lia, and open my mouth to speak. There is so much I want to say to her. So many things that require my most earnest apologies. I do not know where to start.

She holds up her hand. "Whatever it is, you can tell me later," she says.

"But ... yes. Later," I agree.

I give her a brief, bone-crushing hug. Then, she is gone, hurrying back towards the other mages in Argus's coterie. She does not look back, thank the gods.

I hear the infantry captains shout for the men to form their lines. The order is picked up and carried through the ranks by the sergeants. Men and women step-to smartly, a manic, desperate energy shining in their pale faces.

The command is given to move forward. No sooner do the warriors find their stride than I hear the trumpet call to attack. Sergeants bellow to charge, and a mighty roar goes up from the ranked warriors. Their marching cadence breaks as they rush forward, swords and spears upraised, a forest of polished steel glittering red and orange in the fiery light of the sky. In the second rank, I increase my pace, trotting behind them, an arrow fitted to the string, eyes riveted to Rath's dark shape.

I feel a cold shroud fall over me, deadening my nerves. My nervous energy fades, drawn into a tight ball. It feels like a sphere of ice, lodged beneath my breast bone. My senses sharpen, and it seems as if I can see everything around me, all at once, as if my vision has widened.

At the sound of the trumpet call, I see Rath turn, his eyes wide with surprise. He gestures, pointing at the wall of men rushing towards him. He has only a light bodyguard of sweetlings arrayed around him, no more than two hundred. The bulk of his force is still on the other side of the square, finishing off the last of the retreating Mor.

If the sweetlings were mortal, it would be a massacre. We outnumber his bodyguard force twenty to one. If they felt anything resembling human emotion, I might hope that their will would break, and that they would turn tail and flee. But I have seen Rath's children, and my own, in battle too many times to foster such illusions.

The *vod'hule* turns its misshapen head towards us. As soon as it does, the sweetlings between us pull together as one, their movements uncanny, like a shoal of fish drawing together against a predator. The front ranks crash into them, blades ringing on bone, men screaming in fury, or terror.

For one shining, glorious moment, it looks as if it will work. The sweetlings, despite the unity of their movements, are still spread thin, still reacting to the unexpected charge. They fall like scythed wheat as the front line of spearmen run them through, pinning them long enough for the swordsmen at their sides to stab at their vulnerable heads or faces. I see dozens explode into ash as their souls are finally granted the gift of final rest.

Then the enemy ranks pull tighter, thickening like clotting blood. The charge falters, the warriors' screams of victory changing to wails of agony. Hooked bone blades rend and tear, cutting into warm meat, then shearing through bone and sinew. Leather shreds like cloth and steel crumples like papier-mache under the cold weight of the undead. The front line spreads as its forward momentum is absorbed by the weight of the unliving foe, blunting its thrust.

I am close. Almost in range. Rath is there, his eyes wide with pleasure, drinking in the sight of the carnage. The soldiers ahead are slowing, as the rear ranks pile into the men even now dying at the front. The sweet smell of dead things is thick in the air, mingling with the copper reek of blood.

Seeing Rath so close overwhelms my better judgment, and I draw back the arrow, pulling back the string until the gray goose feathers kiss my cheek. Perhaps it will reach. Perhaps.

The instant the arrow leaves the bow I feel the wrongness of the shot. The shaft, subtly warped, curves

away to the left, writhing in the air. I draw a second with a curse, not even waiting to see where it lands.

Other archers around me react to the sound of my string, and loose their own shafts in a ragged, ill-timed volley. The captain turns at the sound, his eyes widening with fury.

"Hold your fire until we're sure of a target, damn you!" he screams, his words barely loud enough to penetrate the din of weapons and the screams of the dying.

But it is too late. The loose volley falls yards short of Rath and the *vod'hule*, raining down on the massed sweetlings. Many are struck but only a handful go down, struck in an eye or at the base of the skull, by lucky shots. The rest do not even slow their grisly work, unencumbered by their mantles of feathered shafts.

I take a deep breath and hold my second shot. I must not waste the opportunity to put an arrow through Rath's black heart if it presents itself. I will not.

The blood magic tastes the red life all around, and uncoils inside of me, sending jolts of hunger and lust through my belly and thighs. I will myself to ignore its call. The power is useless against that which does not live. I must focus on what my own two hands can do. All my magic is useless here.

We stop, still short of the range we need to reach Rath. The captain bellows at the warriors in front of us. "Fight, you men! Put your hearts into your sword arms and fight! Push forward! Push! Push damn you!"

But the men cannot move forward. The sweetlings lash out, fast as striking snakes, cleaving arms and legs, spilling intestines over the blood-slick cobbles. Men and women fall, wailing like damned things, begging for their companions to save them; to end their lives quickly before they can be cut to pieces by the foe.

I look aside and see the main force of Rath's army has turned, is pelting back towards us as fast as their gnarled legs can propel them. They will be on us in moments, a vast tide of dead flesh.

"Archers! Ready! Shoot for your longest range, lads!" I scream, drawing my string and tilting the bow high into the air. All around me, I hear the creak of three hundred bows as the men, desperate to do something, follow my lead.

"No! Belay that! Wait until we're closer!" the captain bellows.

"There is no time!" I shout back. I force myself to not look at him. If he strikes my mutinous soul dead, as is his right, at least I will die knowing I tried. "Archers, take aim!"

"Ho!" the men reply in chorus.

"Let fly!" I scream.

Three hundred bows thrum as one, unleashing a black wave of feathered death. The whistle, for a moment, overcomes the cacophony of fighting men, filling the air with the high, thin sound of flying death.

I do not wait to see if the shots reach the target. "Fire at will!" I scream, plucking another arrow from the quiver and nocking it in one smooth motion. Again the square rings with the bass tone of our thrumming strings. It is only when my second shot is in the air that I pause to see the results of our opening volley.

Rath scurries back, behind the *vod'hule* and out of sight. The hulking creature spreads its arms, staring unflinchingly up into the deadly steel rain. The black cloud descends, and I see dozens of shafts riddle its twisted frame. It staggers backwards, driven to one knee by the fury of our arrows.

Then the second wave falls. Many fall short, pelting the rear ranks of sweetlings with more useless shafts. Others, through inept aim or warped shafts, fly wide, and clatter harmlessly from the cobbles. But many more strike true, into the creature's broad shoulders or back.

I whisper a prayer to the fickle gods, hoping against hope that some lucky shot has managed to hit a vulnerable spot. Praying that Rath lies, even now, wide-eyed with death, with an arrow sticking out of his traitor's eye.

The creature stands once more, its lumpy silhouette bristling with arrows. It ignores them, reaching out with its claw and beckoning. All around us, I hear the sound of bodies jerking, of cloth ripping, as a fresh crop of sweetlings claws their way out of their cocoons.

I concentrate on the *vod'hule*, my eyes never leaving it. Where is he? Did we get him?

"Steady, archers!" I call out.

"Spearmen, ward the archers and mages!" a sergeant orders, somewhere to my left. Out of the corner of my eye, between us and the wall of rushing undead reinforcements, I see the human warriors draw close, forming a thick block, spear tips raised and ready. Behind us, I hear the chanting of the elementalists rising to a crescendo.

Then I see him, still half-sheltered by the golem's bulk. Rath. Even from a distance, I can see the maniacal grin stretching his mouth. He shouts encouragement to his grotesque children, his eyes shining with reflected firelight and the glow of madness.

Instinctively, I draw an arrow all the way back to my cheek, my arm quivering with the strain of holding tight the powerful bow. I gather all my strength, all my rage and fear and pain, and scream with my thoughts.

RATH!

I see him flinch, as if slapped. He reels back, staggered, then looks towards me, his eyes wide now with a new emotion—fear. At his side, the *vod'hule* turns as well, its ravaged head swinging my way, fixing me with its bloodied gaze.

Rath's eyes meet mine, his look of recognition unmistakable even at a distance. They know I am here, I am sure of it. He gestures towards me, desperately pointing in my direction.

I let the bow string snap from my callused fingertips, breathing softly out, soft as a lover's sigh. As the arrow flies into the orange sky, I feel a thrill at the rightness of the shot. A surge of pleasure, almost sexual in its intensity, suffuses me, and I shiver with the force of it.

I look back at Rath, in time to see my shot land. The arrow takes him high, in the chest, slamming him back with the force of its impact. I hear his scream of rage and pain, not in my ears, but in my mind. My sister's cry of triumph rings alongside it, high and proud as the scream of a hawk.

Rath staggers back, away from our deadly missiles, the *vod'hule* moving to shelter him once more with its body. I see the shaft, jutting from the juncture of shoulder and chest. He is screaming, shrieks of pain and rage, which I can hear clearly in my head.

For just a moment, the *vod'hule* reels, staggering as if it shares in its master's pain. I see the cold resolve slip, and its thick limbs twitch, reaching forward as if to embrace Rath. For just an instant, its eyes blaze white, the pearlescent shine overwhelming their usual, blood red tinge. Then it shakes its horned head, like a man waking from a troubling nightmare, and I see it recover itself.

"Ware the enemy!" the spearmen to my left cry, a moment before the flayed lines reach their position. I turn just in time to see Rath's reinforcements crash into the spears.

When I look back, Rath is well out of range, pushed away from the fighting by the *vod'hule*. It stands close to him, shielding him with its impregnable flesh.

The human warriors are trapped between his bodyguard and the much larger force still streaming into the square from the shattered gates.

It is over. I have failed.

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CHAPTER TWENTY-SEVEN

Men scream in terror, or agony, as the sweetlings begin their butchery. Many of the unliving creatures hurl themselves bodily upon the bristling line of spear tips thrust at them. Only a few are damaged sufficiently to sever the cords binding their souls; many more simply heave forward, pushing until the shining points burst through their backs, then scrambling up the shafts until they can reach the startled spearmen holding them.

Claws rise and fall like threshing tools. Coatings of stinking black Mor blood turn crimson as human blood is spilled into the chill air. The men brace themselves, grounding the butts of their weapons behind their booted feet, desperate to keep the foe at a distance.

I see the front ranks of spearmen buckling, bowing towards me as the men in the front ranks flinch away, giving in to the atavistic horror that the sweetlings inspire. Sergeants and captains bellow orders, commanding the men to stand fast. The words sound desperate to my ears.

"Kirin! Kirin!" someone shouts behind me. I turn to see Argus Cho, striding through the massed bowmen around me. He is surrounded by a knot of elementalists, who flank him like an honor guard.

I turn, not waiting to be dismissed; I have graver concerns than breaking with military protocol. A moment later, I reach him.

"What must we do?" he demands. "The abominations were too fast, and charged forward before the pyromancers could summon fresh allies. Their force is engaged with ours, and fear that if the aeromancers loose the lightning that many men will be harmed."

I look him in the eye. "Strike. Strike as hard as you can. It is too late to worry about such things now."

The words slip past my lips like razors of ice, slicing me deep, infusing me with their deadly chill. Argus's eyes widen, as if he is shocked by what I have said, but then I see him nod, and realize that he, too, came to the same conclusion before he approached me.

"I'm sorry, but we have no choice now. Make every death count, for every man who falls simply adds to Rath's might."

He stares at me for a moment, as if I am the most loathsome thing he has ever seen, then drops his eyes. I see the realization that I am right flow across him, aging him ten years in a moment. He nods.

The master elementalist turns back and gestures to the mages standing behind us. His eyes burn, bright as glowing lava, full of smoldering rage and incalculable force. Lines of terrible responsibility are graven into his face, as if gouged there by some rude claw.

At his wave, the pyromancers give a mighty shout, and I see new forms coalescing from the fires all around. Seconds later, a fresh menagerie of burning avatars stride from the flames, rushing towards the massed sweetlings on our flank. The stink of burning meat rises on the wind.

"Gods damn you for this, Kirin," he says to me softly, fixing me with his burning glare.

I meet his eye and nod. "Aye. I've no doubt they will. Gods' speed to you, master elementalist."

He spares a moment to give me one last look, then turns away, facing the *vod'hule*. Orange lightning erupts from his eyes, wreathing his face in a corona of energy. At the same moment, flames envelop his hands, crisping the sleeves of his grey woolen coat.

They burn briskly, consumed by the terrible heat, until he tears off the garment and the woolen shirt beneath with an annoyed snarl. Argus's flesh is untouched by the fire, shining like marble in the glow of his burning hands. He roars, his voice rising above the din, and strides forward, his coterie flanking him. Soldiers part, allowing Argus a clear line to the densest part of the fighting.

Into the massed sweetlings, Argus Cho charges. He swings his flaming fists like hammers, smiting creature after creature. Wherever they strike, I see a flash of fiery lightning. The sweetlings struck are blasted into ash.

Cho's bodyguard pull together, wielding their own elemental talents in bursts of flame or azure lightning. The few geomancers who have managed to recover stand just behind Cho, their fists encased in massive gauntlets of living rock. They maneuver them like shields, a tactic borrowed from the Mor, sheltering his flanks from anything that approaches. The air rings with thunderclaps, stunning every ear and dazzling every eye. Behind them, the army captains mobilize their ranks, following Argus's charge.

He is unstoppable, a juggernaut of flame and storm, wielding death in his clenched fists. But, he is not immortal, and all it will take is one claw, one biting, fanged mouth, attacking from behind, and he will fall.

The elemental defenders cut into the densest part of the massed sweetlings. Argus's blows fall like the hammers of a war god, and creature after creature is reduced to blowing dust. At the flanks, the pyromancer's burning avatars smite with their flaming paws and bite with their cavernous, fire-lined mouths, sending still more back to the realms beyond the Vale.

But even as the human counterattack begins, I see it weakening. Sweetlings lash out, ignoring the peril of the men's swords and the blasts of fire and lightning, driven only by the desire to kill the defenders amongst them.

Every time a man or woman falls, they rise again moments later, one of Rath's ever-swelling brood. The warriors' resolve is tested, stretching to the breaking point and beyond, as their former allies return from death as slavering nightmares.

I feel so helpless. With only a few arrows left, and our forces mixed in with Rath's, I cannot afford the luxury of shooting blind. The blood magic writhes in my belly, but there is no enemy I can unleash it upon. I feel bitter, frustrated tears sting my eyes.

Across the square, I see Rath, safely out of range and cavorting at the feet of his creation. The *vod'hule* stares across at its minions, its face unreadable. If it feels pleasure at their performance, I cannot tell; it is too alien, unfathomable, even to me.

Unbidden, the memory of my own son comes to me. Soon I will be reunited with him, I have no doubt of it. The enemy is too powerful, growing in strength with every fallen soldier. I think of the *vod'hule*, Rath's own child, which even now still shelters him from harm.

Something about the association troubles me. Disquiet cuts through my fear. I feel as if I am missing something, some invaluable idea or concept. No sooner do I pause to reflect on it than I realize what it is.

The *vod'hule* is not Rath's child. Made from its petrified flesh, it was, but it is not, nor ever was it his. It had decades—decades—in the company of another, before it was ripped bodily from the warm shelter of its womb.

I think back to the moment after my arrow struck Rath. The *vod'hule* staggered as well, its eyes blazing white for a moment. It reached for him, as if it wanted to embrace him, before recovering itself a moment later.

The realization of what I saw floods over me, taking my breath away. I know what I must do.

I just pray it is not too late.

I toss aside my worthless bow and turn, my eyes frantically searching for Savard's dark-clad man. Minutes pass as I look, up and down the swirling lines, until despair begins to overwhelm the brief surge of hope that still pulses faintly in my chest. I do not see him. Did he go into battle with the other soldiers, and even now has fallen and been brought back as another pearl-eyed monster?

Then I see him, a figure clad in charcoal black, at the combat's fringe. Even as he fights, blade scything along with the soldiers', I can see him watching the distant form of Rath, waiting for some scant opening.

I run towards him, shouldering aside men and women. I pause long enough to scoop up a sword, still clutched in the tattered remains of some unlucky soldier's hand. I peel away the skin like a discarded glove, still horrifyingly warm.

"Oi! Savard! Hey, there, Circle Man!" I scream, trying to be heard above the screams and clang of steel on bone.

A hunched creature slashes with a bladed forelimb, and I hear the sickening crunch of bone. A woman goes down, her face cleft in twain, flesh shredded to the breastbone. She does not even have time to scream, and falls, open-eyed to the paving stones. Her killer looks over her body, fixing me with its opal eyes.

Without hesitation, before it can extract its weapon, I step over the fallen soldier and stab down, savagely, thrusting the tip of my borrowed weapon into the thing's fanged maw. The tip crunches through gristle and meat. I twist savagely, praying wordlessly that I have reached the cord leading down from the base of the skull.

For a terrifying moment, the thing glares at me, its face bisected by the shining sword, its teeth chomping against the weapon, snapping off one by one against the unyielding steel. It frees its bloodied arm blade from the fallen woman, and rears back to strike.

Then, it crumbles, surrendering itself to death as my sword finally finds its mark. Moments later, it is nothing but a pile of greasy ash, blowing in the gale.

I almost die a second time as the fallen woman's body heaves beneath me, spawning another sweetling literally beneath my feet. The newborn killer thrashes and heaves, momentarily disoriented by its rebirth, arms and legs scissoring as it claws its way from its fleshy cocoon.

I scream and jump back, feeling one of the thing's barbs tearing into my flesh. My thigh burns as the sweetling's talon digs into the meat of my leg and snags fast. Heedless of the pain, I throw myself bodily backwards, feeling the sickening tearing of flesh and leather as the hook is pulled free.

I roll aside, then try to regain my feet, but my injured leg folds the instant I put weight on it, pitching me to the cold stones. Booted feet are all around me, stamping and scraping, a forest of woolen leggings and leather.

I scramble away from where the sweetling is even now rising, its mad white eyes searching for me. It spies me a moment later, and drops to all fours, scurrying towards me like a pale monstrous spider.

I can see the fallen woman's face, eerily preserved atop the scrawny, rope-muscled body. One sad breast flops in the cold air; the other side of the chest is a flayed expanse of wet, red muscle, studded with spines. A mantle of bone spurs cascades down its twisted back, like porcupine quills, merging with

the matted tangle of her hair. The legs have been broken and re-formed in the process of the sweetling's rebirth, and flex the wrong way on shattered knees.

It should not be able to move, let alone scramble forward with such appalling speed, but it does. It does not know mercy or pity; pain or fear. All it knows now is the desire to kill at its master's bidding.

I try to rise a second time, biting down on the urge to scream as my wounded leg protests. I manage to get to my feet, my weight on my good leg, swaying as my sense of balance gently spins.

"Come on then!" I scream at the thing, gripping my sword tighter. "Come on!"

The sweetling launches itself at me, arms spread, its opal eyes shining with insane rage. I shift to the left, trying to move aside, and my leg folds once more, sending a lance of agony through me. I fall to the ground, howling my denial as I crash to the stones.

"No!"

But the sweetling is taken by surprise as well, and sails past me. Its claws reach for me as it passes overhead, one sliding up, across my cheek and brow. Where it touches leaves behind a trail of fire, but compared to the pain in my thigh it is a small hurt, almost trivial.

The creature crashes into the massed warriors in a tangle of bone spurs and spines. Men shout at this new danger, turning to interpose shields between them and the sweetling. Swords hack down, into the thing's flesh, chopping out chunks of muscle and bone. Soon it is over and I see the woman's body succumb to its second death.

I claw my way to my feet once more, my blood singing. The red magic twists in my belly, responding to my lust. I want nothing more than to watch another sweetling, then another, and another, fall into ash and dust. Hacking and chopping until none remain, or until the sweet release of death claims me.

No! You cannot! my sister screams in my head. You must find Savard's man and get out of this. If you fall, they will have no idea of what to do. Leave the killing, and dying, to the soldiers. You must stop Rath and the vod'hule!

I blink as her words penetrate the mist that fills my head. A moment later, the haze of rage drops away.

"You're right. Thank you, sister," I whisper.

I turn back to where I saw the Gray Circle man. I find him once more. He is still fighting, his sword slashing all around him. He is not unscathed; his robes are slashed open, exposing his chest, and blood sparkles against his pale skin.

"Savard! Savard!" I yell, limping towards him. He hears me this time, and turns towards me. When he sees who it is, he disengages and pushes back towards me. We meet scant yards from where the battle still rages, and I have to raise my voice to be heard over the clamor.

"I need you! I have an idea!" I say.

The man's eyes go wide above the dark cloth covering his lower face, and he thrusts over my shoulder with his sword. I lurch aside, just in time to avoid another shambling horror.

The sweetling impales itself on the Circle man's blade. He holds it at bay, his face pale with strain, as I line up my own cut. I bring my borrowed sword down on the back of its neck, hard. Its head tumbles free, then crumbles into dust before it can strike the ground.

"We have to get clear of this!" I shout, turning away from the tumult. I do not wait to see if he will follow. He must.

He does, following me out of the press. When we reach the fringes of the fighting, I turn to him.

"What is your name?" I ask.

"Yusif," he answers, after a pause.

I cannot tell if he is lying to me, but at least I have a name now, something personal I can appeal to if he decides to resist me.

"Do you know where Savard has Napaula, Yusif?"

"The old woman?" he asks, frowning. "Aye."

"I need her. Now," I say.

Yusif frowns, confusion in his eyes. I see him draw breath to question me, and wave the words aside before he can utter them.

"I don't have time to explain. Please, Yusif, will you help me or not?"

He hesitates for a moment, then nods. "Aye. She is being held not far from here."

I let out a breath, allowing my shoulders to droop. Good. I could have compelled him to go for her with my red magic, but once out my presence who knows if it would have been enough to make him return? Probably not.

"Then hurry, and bring her as fast as you can. Go!"

He nods and sheathes his sword, then sprints away across the square, headed back into the tangled maze of city streets.

I grip the sword more tightly, and settle back to wait. My leg throbs, and I grit my teeth against the tearing pain. Now all I have to do is keep alive until he returns.

I pray it will be soon.

I do not see the blow that fells Argus Cho, but I, like every other soldier in the square, know when it lands. One moment he is fighting, wreathed in orange lightning, lashing out with hammers of light and fire, and the next, he is gone, the light snuffed out like a candle.

I see his coterie pull together, striking in all directions with bolts of their own elemental force, as they frantically try to disengage from the sweetlings surrounding them. The soldiers following in their wake send up a massed cry, the sound full of dismay, and redouble their own efforts, slashing wildly.

I scramble up the base of a nearby lamp post, clumsy on my injured leg, needing a better view, but all I can see are swirling armored forms besieged by rippling waves of pale flesh. At the heart of the fighting, where the figures are thickest, I see a knot of color—Cho's elemental bodyguard—tightly packed, moving frantically away.

I look back, to where Savard's man disappeared, torn by the desire to rush forward, to run to Lia, and the very real possibility that if he should return with Napaula while I am gone, I will miss them.

Azure lightning stabs down, scattering sweetlings like fall leaves, and I drop from my perch. I hiss in pain as I land, my slashed leg screaming in protest. No matter the cost, I must be there for Lia. I limp forwards, shouldering aside armored men and women, ignoring their curses and shouts.

The knot of gaily-colored mages finally breaks clear of the fighting. I hurry the final yards to their side. They have something in their arms, born aloft on many hands: a pale body, skin shining in the orange light.

Argus Cho.

They hurry to the first clear spot they can find, and lower him to the paving stones. Even before I reach them, I can see the terrible damage done to his body, see the twist of shattered limbs smeared with bright red blood. Mages scream for priests of Shanira. Others weep, shaking with sobs as tears stream down their grimed cheeks.

"Where is Lia? Where is Lia Cho?" I scream. None reply. Finally, a bruised pyromancer points towards the figures surrounding Argus. I rush towards them, wondering if it is already too late.

I push past the knot of mages and into the inner circle. Lia is there, kneeling on the cold stone, her father in cradled in her lap. I flash back to our first meeting, to when Lia held me in the same way. The memory invokes a feeling of vertigo, like I am falling.

I shake off the sensation and kneel beside her fallen father. My learned eyes take in the extent of his injuries, lingering on the savage gash in his side. The wound is a gaping mouth, longer than my hand, framed by bloody, jagged lips. Blood pulses out with every beat of his faltering heart.

I do not even need to open my secret eye to see it is mortal. I am amazed that he is even still alive.

"Please," Lia says, her voice full of graveyard dust. "Help him."

I look at her bruised face, into her good eye. The other is swollen shut, bruised black as sin. Her lower lip is deeply split, and blood runs down her chin, splattering her white silks with gore.

"I'll try," I say, reaching for him, shivering as the blood magic comes sliding up my throat.

"No," Argus croaks. "You ... will not ... soil me..."

"Father, *please*," Lia whispers. "Let Kirin help you. Just until the priests arrive..."

"I said *no*, damn you," he says, staring at me with terrible force.

I hesitate, my hand inches from his flesh, holding the tendrils of the blood magic at bay by sheer force of will.

"Kirin for the love of the gods, *help him!*" Lia screams into my face.

"I ... I cannot," I say, hanging my head. "He has made his choice."

"But ... you can..."

"Lia," I say, taking her hand in mine and raising my eyes to hers. "He doesn't want it. Let him go."

Lia's howl of fury splits the night, a banshee wail of unalloyed grief. I swallow down my red magic, practically swooning as its rage at being thwarted washes over me.

Argus goes limp in her arms, his breath rattling out softly. The cords standing out in his neck and

shoulders smooth as his head slumps back, falling against Lia's breast.

I drop Lia's hand and grip my blade, then draw it from its sheath. I know what is coming.

"Kirin, what are you—" Lia begins, lightning flashing in her eye.

Argus twitches, his muscles flexing like plucked strings.

"Get back!" I yell, putting action to words and rising to my feet. I reach forward and give her a mighty shove, overbalancing her and pitching her backwards to the stones. Argus's body tumbles from her lap, writhing like a beheaded snake.

His eyes fly open, and I see them fill from within with shining opal. His mouth opens, and the thing that was Argus Cho hisses, a sound completely devoid of all humanity.

I strike, swinging my borrowed blade with all the force in my arms and shoulders. The sword chops into the side of his powerful neck and buries itself in his spine, lodging with a sickening sound. I yank it back, accompanied by the horrified screams of Lia and the other mages, and it comes free in a spray of blood. Argus continues to twist, his flesh distending as the sweetling forms inside, preparing to claw itself free.

It takes four blows to sever his head. Four blows, every one accompanied by screams. Four blows, each of which shivers through the steel, into my hand and arm. It is a sensation I know I will never forget, for as long as I might live.

The head finally tumbles down in a spray of red, and Argus falls motionless at last.

"No!" Lia screams, crashing into me. Together, we fall to the hard stones. I drop the sword and surrender myself to her, swallowing my own cries of pain as her fists pummel me. Her fingernails claw at my face and arms. I do not resist.

"You killed him! You killed my father! Oh, Kirin, gods damn you, *what have you done!*" she screams.

I look into her eyes, into the furious lightning there, and know I am moments away from death.

"I spared him from a fate worse than death," I whisper. "Lia, I'm so sorry."

She flinches away from my voice like a slap, then looks down at her bloodied fist. It is my blood there, on her knuckles and nails. The pain in my face is soothing, like a balm, calming in a way I cannot understand.

Then she is in my arms, sobbing uncontrollably. The other mages mill about us, fire and lightning shining in every eye. I look at the pyromancer who directed me here, and hold out my hand to her.

"Will you help her tend to her father?" I ask. "The body should be taken away, until we have time to honor him properly."

"Y-yes. I ... I..." she stammers, reaching for Lia with awkward hands.

"I have to go, now, love," I whisper in Lia's ear. "Rath must be stopped. Do you understand? He must be stopped."

She looks up at me, her eyes empty of all light, all life. Where moments before there was rage and lightning, now there is only a fathomless grief. I see in her eyes nothing but a blasted battlefield, devoid of all hope. Wordlessly, she allows me to pry her clutching hands free. I push her towards the pyromancer.

"Take care of her," I ask. It is all I can say. She nods mutely.

I stand, walking back towards where I left Yusif. The mages part before me. No eye meets mine; all look down, or away, as if my gaze is something infectious, a thing to be avoided at all costs.

"Where are you going?" the pyromancer asks, finally finding her voice.

I see, under the lamp post, dark-robed forms. Amongst them is a small figure, her gray-white hair shining in the firelight.

I drop my sword. "To end this."

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CHAPTER TWENTY-EIGHT

The pain in my leg reaches a crescendo, grating through muscle and bone. I grind my teeth together and limp towards the lamp post, holding in tears of agony. I can weep later. If there is a later.

Twenty dark-robed forms are massed under the lamp: Gray Circle men, all. I see Yusif at their head, shivering a bit in his slashed robes, standing beside a small, hunched figure. Napaula.

"We came as fast as we could. The count wishes to know your plans, so he can factor them into his strategy."

I nod, the turn to the shivering form beside him. "In a moment. Napaula, are you all right?"

Yusif makes an annoyed noise, almost a growl, but I ignore it. Everything now hinges on one amazingly strong, doomed woman. If she will not help me...

No. I will not even contemplate such a thing. I cannot afford to doubt.

"I am ... so cold ... tired..." she whispers, wrapping her blanket more tightly across her thin shoulders.

I look to a Circle man standing beside Yusif and hold out my hand. "Your cloak. Now."

It is only as I utter the words that I realize the power of command suffuses them, the red magic threading, unbidden, through the fibers of my voice. The man's face goes slack, and he instantly obeys, opening the clasp at his throat and swinging the thick wool off his back.

He hands me the heavy garment and I drape it over the old woman's back. She looks at me and smiles a weary smile.

"Your baby is close, Napaula. Do you want to see him?" I whisper.

"He here?" she says, straightening. Her eyes search the square hungrily. "Where?"

Yusif hears us, though we speak softly, and moves forward, grabbing my shoulder.

"What are you doing, Lady Kirin?" he demands.

I keep my voice calm, reining in the skeins of crimson magic which threaten to enter my voice. "I'm going to take Napaula to see her son."

He searches my eyes, looking for something there, treachery perhaps. If he is startled by what I mean to do, he is hiding it well. A moment later, he drops his hand.

"You should know: Count Savard is planning a counterattack. Even now, assassins are massing on the eastern edge of the square." He points to the far side of the courtyard. I follow his gesture, but of course, I see nothing. The Gray Circle would not be so crude and unprofessional as to be visible.

"Good," I reply, trying to keep out of my voice the certainty that any such attack is doomed to fail. "It will be up to him to stop Rath, if we fail. Tell him to focus on him first, and then on the *vod'hule*. We can hope his death will cast it away, but we cannot count on it. Do you understand?"

Yusif nods. "I will tell him."

I turn back to Napaula, still shivering under her borrowed cloak. My inner eye slides open, gazing upon

the shift and flow of her life.

The golden light I put into her, taken from Lia, and from within my own body, has faded to little more than a dim glow. Dark spots and blotches mar the tapestry of her life, patches of ravaging sickness. Some of her organs—her kidneys, and the better part of her liver—have stopped functioning altogether. Darkness spreads through her blood from the dead, gray masses, further sapping her already fading strength.

Napaula is dying. She should be unconscious, deep in the final sleep that precedes death, but the stolen vitality flowing through her keeps her on her feet. But there is nothing, short of stealing another's life, that I can do to keep death at bay for much longer.

"I promised you would see your son's face. Do you remember?" I ask her.

She nods up at me, blinking. Tears shine in her faded eyes.

"Then let us go and meet him. Together."

I lace my arm through hers, taking her slight weight on my uninjured leg. Together, we stagger toward where the human defenders are making their last stand against Rath and his army.

The Gray Circle men, unbidden, form around us, a dark honor guard, shouldering aside the distracted human soldiers. As they do, the soldiers turn, wondering who could possibly be pushing past them, who would be mad enough to move toward the implacable enemy. When they see me, and the old woman at my side, both of us unarmored and unarmed, they scowl. Some shout warnings before our bodyguard shoves them aside.

Soon we are close to the fighting. Just ahead, the last of the city's living defenders curse and scream. The sound of blades scraping against bone fills the world.

I look over and see Yusif at my side. Without meaning to, I smile, and from the crinkling around his eyes, I can tell he is returning the gesture. It is good to have someone beside me in this.

But I cannot allow it.

"Tell your men to stay here, and send word to the count," I shout to him.

He pauses for a moment, gazing at me. There is a strange look in his eye, something familiar that I cannot place. He puts out his hand, and I realize what the look means. My skin flushes cold.

It is respect, my sister says softly, watching him through my eyes. *He wants to shake your hand.*

I swallow the sudden lump in my throat and extend my own bloodied hand, grasping his firmly. He says nothing; he does not need to. He lets go, and sketches a sign, his fingertips touching opposing shoulders before reaching forward to brush my own, before bowing deeply.

I do not recognize the gesture, but its meaning is clear enough. He is wishing me goodbye.

I nod, and he repeats the gesture to Napaula. She repeats it, the motion as smooth as only endless repetition can make it.

Yusif turns and barks an order to the rest of the Circle men, the words snatched away by the gale and the surrounding chaos. They form on him, and turn back, pressing away towards the edge of the square.

I grasp Napaula's arm more tightly, lifting her spare weight onto my hip. I can feel her trembling, with

cold or with fear I cannot tell. I wonder if she can feel my own quaking. I hope not.

The old woman looks up at me and says, "My baby is good boy. Good boy."

I nod. "Of course he is. Come on, then. We have to get his attention, if we can."

I close my eyes and recall the sight of Napaula's face, eyes shining with love as she sang to the decades-old child within her. Now she sings the tremulous melody again, the half-heard words poignant in their simplicity. I remember her singing them, in the still, quiet hours of the night, cradling her swollen belly with age-spotted hands, stroking it with a mother's fierce love.

I hold her song in my mind, the cadence and rhythm of it, then gather all the strength of my will, fueled by the night's rage and fear and pain, concentrating until my head throbs. I feel a tickling on my face, but I ignore it.

The song echoes in my head. I cannot understand the words, but the meaning is plain. I feel the emotions of the night: the terror and loathing, the anger and frustration, all churning inside of me, threatening to rip the delicate melody asunder. I focus all of my fear into a single silent shout, and push it out into the world.

Rath!

With everything I have, I scream in my mind. I feel the churning emotions slip into the night, riding on the wordless call. My eyes are tightly closed, but even still it is as if I can see it, flying out like a crystal arrow, streaking over the seething mass of sweetlings between me and him.

I open my eyes, and see Rath and the *vod'hule* stagger, as if slapped. As one, their heads swivel towards us.

In an instant, every sweetling in the square—every single one, in their countless thousands—stops. They stand, frozen, like grotesque statues, completely unmoving. The human resistance, finding their enemies so abruptly stilled, trickles off as well, as men and woman sag aside, gasping, struggling to make the most of the sudden respite.

I reach up and absently brush at my upper lip, and am unsurprised when my hand comes away red. Something tore inside, as I gave silent voice to the scream, I could feel it, and now blood runs down my face. No time for that now.

"Come on, milady. Let's go meet your son."

Napaula and I push through the last of the warriors between us and the wall of undead. The human defenders part before us, drawing aside wordlessly. They do not understand what is happening, I can see that, but every one of them knows these moments could very well be their last.

We walk to the nearest sweetling, a savage thing no taller than my waist. Its arms have been hacked off, but still it stands, the bone spurs on its shoulders and chest slicked with freshly-spilled blood. It looks at us with its mad, opal eyes, its slash of a mouth hanging open.

Even crippled, I know we cannot stand against it should it attack. I hold my breath and try to not flinch away; to be strong for her sake.

A moment later, it stands aside. As does the next. And the next.

As I watch, a corridor opens in the nightmare ranks, an open line leading, straight as a ruler, towards Rath and the *vod'hule*. I take a deep, shuddering breath and step forward. No sooner do we pass into

the massed sweetlings than they close behind us, cutting off all hope of retreat.

I feel Napaula shudder as she recoils from the death all around us. Her lullaby falters for a moment, trailing off to silence, then resumes a moment later. Even to my jaded eye, the display of shredded, red flesh is overwhelming; I can only imagine what it must be like for her.

I look back and see the city's defenders are pulling back, dragging their wounded with them. Some run for the still-closed gates of the Imperial Palace, but most simply lean on their weapons, grateful for the chance to take a breath.

It will not help them. If we fail, if Savard cannot take advantage of this opportunity and kill Rath, or if I am wrong, and Rath's death does not release the souls of his army, I know his creatures will cut through the last of them in short order. Once past the courtyard, there will be nothing to stop them from spreading through the city like a cancer.

It is Rath's ambition to rule; he told me as much in the cemetery. I share his power of necromancy, and bear the marks of the blood magic on my face, and because of this I know something he does not: no human will ever willingly follow such a master. The people will not welcome him. The emperor will brand him as traitor and the priests will name him abomination.

If Rath takes the throne, he will only be able to hold it through terror. He will have to perform such atrocities that I can scarce imagine, overwhelming his subjects' loathing with crushing terror, quelling all resistance before it can take root.

I remember the look in his eyes as he cut the vessel in Napaula's body, the mad certainty in them, and know he would do it. He will do anything, *anything*, to fulfill what he believes is his destiny.

The Mor were right. Nothing mortal should have this sort of power. It is too seductive, too ultimately corrupting. Maybe I should have surrendered to my fate, and let Napaula die. I could have killed Rath in the catacombs. I know I could have. This is all my fault.

Do not doubt the value of one human life, my sister whispers to me, her thoughts as warm and comforting as an embrace. *Have you learned nothing? Death is not the answer—only life. Remember what you have learned, and have faith in that. Not in the feckless gods, or even in other people, but in life itself. It is time to move past what you were, and to forgive yourself for the things you've done.*

I feel my back straightening as her words sink deep, evoking a thrill in my breast. It pushes aside the chill that has been in my heart for so long, since the moment my son's last breath fell from his tiny lips.

Yes. Even though the effort may kill me, I must do what I know is right. Not for Lia, or her father, or even for the countless thousands who have fallen or will fall if Rath is not stopped, but for myself, and the promise I made to the old woman at my side.

I pat Napaula's trembling hand, and she looks into my black eyes. She smiles at me, and I feel my heart soar to new heights.

Surrounded by hungry death, I lead my sacrifice forward.

* * * *

"Welcome to my court, Kirin. Have you finally come to show me the respect I am due, and to apologize for daring to raise your hand against me?"

I do not answer. Instead, I watch Rath's creature, my every sense alert, waiting for the barest flicker of

reaction. Waiting for ... something. Anything.

Rath stands at the *vod'hule*'s feet, blood on his hands and on his breast. The arrow that nearly killed him is clutched in his hands. He holds it like a king would a scepter. He must have pulled it from his own flesh; his shirt is crimson from neck to waist.

Madness shines in his bloodshot eyes. Almost without thought, I look at him with my secret eye, and gasp at what I see.

He should be dead. The damage is worse than I had hoped. My arrow pierced his lung and slit the side of the vessel leading to his heart. His chest is full of blood. He should be lying, face down, gasping for his final breaths, not standing here, glaring at me in triumph.

No sooner do I wonder how he has survived than I see the hair-fine tendrils of black light connecting Rath to his creation. They ebb and shift, pulsing with their own life, and I realize in a flash that the *vod'hule* is keeping him alive, feeding him a portion of its own dark life force.

I do not know what will happen when Rath is severed from those tendrils, is cut off from the thing he has forged with his will and insane ambition, but I mean to find out.

"Why are you here, Kirin, and not huddling with the others? Are you hoping to kill me? To slip a knife between my ribs and deny me my destiny? I trust you can see with your witch's sight that such an effort would be pointless." He raises his hands, as if to give me a better view.

"With my aunt at my side, nothing can destroy me. Nothing. I am not dead, but neither am I alive. I am what you could have been, if you'd had the courage."

He steps close to me, lowering his voice to a conspiratorial murmur.

"Once I have united all of the people of the city under my banner, I will march on the Mor," he says.

"United?" I almost scream, unable to stop myself. "You mean killed, and brought back! Why not say it?"

Rath smiles and shrugs. "Sacrifices must be made. Come now, Kirin, don't look so shocked. You must admit, my servants possess a certain ... potency ... that the army lacks. After I unite the people, I will lead the army back to the Mor. None has ever been able to attack them where they live: underground. I can. I *will*."

"Every last one of them, young and old, will join me in the end. After I've eliminated the Mor, our people will be safe for all time, united under my benevolent rule. I'll live forever, my wisdom boundless and eternal, and every man, woman and child will serve me before being allowed to pass beyond."

I bite back my disgusted retort, eyes firmly downcast. If I look him in the eye, I know I will not be able to control the red magic which, even now, ravens for his life. I do not know what will happen if I pit my own magic against that which sustains him, but I know I can no longer fight wrong with wrong. I will not.

"You can still join me," he whispers, his breath tickling my ear. It is foul, thick with the stench of clotted blood. "Sete has strength enough for us both. We can live forever, you and I, king and queen of a mighty Empire. Join your wisdom to my own, and purge the creatures who killed your son from the face of the world forever. I can do it. *We* can do it, I swear."

For just an instant, I am tempted. I will never have to face death. Never have to confront the things beyond the vale, or stand before the unknowable gods and face their final judgment. I would be beautiful for all eternity, with power over the entire world. It is everything, and more, that my mother ever desired,

more than even her wildest dreams could have hoped to attain.

The instant passes, and I feel the heavy weight of that choice slip from me, like a lead cloak dropping off my shoulders. No. I know far too well the price of such choices.

I think of my son, waiting for me on the other side. How can I not look forward to that reunion? How can I dread allowing nature to one day take its rightful course?

I feel purged by the choice, as if my body and soul have been washed clean. Inside, I feel my sister's satisfied smile, the heat of her approval warming me from within, like a tiny fire.

I shake my head. "I want no part of your glorious empire, Rath. I ... I just came so Napaula could see her son."

Rath sighs, the gesture affected as a stage mummer's. "Pity. You would have made a wonderful queen, dark and terrible, beautiful as death itself. People would have remembered you for endless generations, and quaked at the sound of your name."

"They already will," I whisper back, the words no louder than a newborn's breath, but Rath hears them, and laughs, the sound full of mockery at what he no doubt sees as hubris. He turns away from me, bending to focus his will on the old woman at my side.

"It is good to see you again, Napaula," he says lifting her chin with one blood-slicked hand. She jerks her face aside, sunken lips quivering with the intensity of her loathing. Rath steps back, stung by her rejection, and glares at us both.

"What did you hope would happen, here, milady? Did you think you could command your son to destroy me? Did you think he would stop me?"

"I just want to see. See his face. I wait so long," she replies.

Rath smiles his disturbing smile once more, gesturing back to the towering thing behind him.

"Then look, milady. Look on what your son has become, thanks to my aunt and my wisdom."

The thing steps forward on splayed claws, twice the height of a man, glowering down at us with its red, red eyes. The circle of horns crowning its brow gleams in the firelight. I open my secret eye and look at it, but all I can see is a roiling mass of darkness, a black shroud through which I glimpse flashes of souls, trapped in the warp and weft of the *vod'hule's* unnatural essence.

Napaula gives a strangled cry as it reaches down, trailing a claw longer than my hand down her cheek. She reaches up and touches the enormous paw with one wizened fingertip.

"My boy," she breathes. "My sweet, sweet boy. What he do to you?"

The *vod'hule's* eyes shift, the red leaking from their corners, exposing briefly the sheen of opal. It cocks its head, as if listening to her words.

Napaula turns to Rath and meets his smirking gaze. His grin broadens, stretching his mouth with a rictus of humorless mirth.

"Are you not going to thank me? With your son at my side, harnessed to my own talents, I will drive the Mor from our gates and bring a new era of order to—"

Napaula spits in his face. The gob of spittle runs down his cheek, below Rath's shocked eyes.

"You liar," she hisses. "You very bad man. I trust you, but you no help. I hope you die."

Rath wipes the spit from his face, his mad smile wiped away. Cold fury fills his eyes. He bends to push his face into hers.

"Didn't you hear, old woman?" he asks. "I cannot die. Thanks to you."

He looks up at the *vod'hule*. "Kill her. Kill them both," he says, turning his back on us.

I close my eyes, bracing myself for what it to come. Please, gods, I know you and I are not on good terms, but if you have mercy, make my death quick and painless. Please do not make me scream and beg.

The seconds stretch out endlessly, time dilating as I wait, eyes closed, for the first blow to land. I count a breath. Two. Three.

I open my eyes, curious despite myself.

The *vod'hule* towers over us, claws upraised, poised to strike. Napaula stands beneath it, her arms open, as if welcoming its stroke. Her eyes are wide, accepting the fate that hangs above her. Her lips move as she sings her lullaby one final time.

The beast's terrible infant face looks down at her, its plump lips hanging open, exposing the spiraling rows of needle teeth within. Its eyes shine white, full of conflicting emotion. Hunger. Adoration. Terror. Love.

Rath stops, and turns back. He sees the *vod'hule*'s hesitation. He scowls, his face darkening with fury.

"I said kill her. Now!"

The thing flinches away from the shout and shakes its head. I stare at it with my secret sight, see the darkness spinning within it, faster now. As I watch, I see the face of Rath's aunt, Sete, float up through the blackness. She glares out at the world through the *vod'hule*'s eyes. With my mortal vision, I see the thing's eyes shift red, the crimson stain leaking back, covering the opal from a moment before.

"Kill her!" he screams, his voice breaking. Once more the *vod'hule* flinches, raising its claws, but still it does not strike. I see the red and white, warring in its eyes, shifting and swirling.

So engrossed am I in the struggle before me that I do not see Rath stride forward. Do not see the knife in his hands, swinging back, until it is too late. I catch the motion out of the corner of my eye, but by the time I look down, and see him moving forward, it is already too late.

"Napaula!" I scream, knowing even as I do it is futile.

Rath grunts as his blow strikes her, the knife, clenched in his two fists, slamming into her chest. It punches through her brittle breast bone, impaling her laboring heart. Napaula looks at him, a smile turning up the corners of her lips, then, a moment later, sags to the stones.

I rush to her side, my learned gaze riveted to the knife handle protruding from her breast, but I know it is already too late.

"I..." she whispers, and I bend so that my ear is close to her mouth. "I ... see you on ... other side. I tell gods what you ... do for me. For my boy. I tell ... I tell them ... you try to be good..."

"Don't talk," I say.

She gasps, then goes limp. I look into her unblinking eyes, still so very full of love. She does not look afraid.

I look into her face as the last light fades from those eyes, and smile. I want the last thing she sees to be a smiling face. Let her take that, not the vision of the hulking, skinless thing her son has become, with her across the vale. I wait for the opal sheen to grow in her eyes, for the twitchings which will herald the birth of the sweetling that will be my killer.

It does not come. Napaula lies on the stones, her body intact, her eyes clear of the white shroud. I look up into Rath's face.

He is grinning, relishing the sight of the dead woman, waiting for the same transformation. He will welcome the sight of the sweetling cutting into me, I can tell. Even as I watch, Rath's smile falters, replaced with a look of confusion.

"Why isn't she—" he asks, then stops.

A gasp rips from his throat as a clawed hand punches through his chest in a spray of crimson. A warm mist splatters my face, as Rath's life blood spills out into the freezing air.

Behind him, I see the *vod'hule*, eyes shining white. Its infant face is contorted with something I have not seen before.

Rage.

"No," Rath gasps. "No. You cannot ... do this..."

The *vod'hule*—Napaula's son—raises its arm, lifting Rath's twitching body up into the air. Rath's fists beat at the claws impaling him, feeble and ineffective. His mouth opens and closes as he breathes denials.

The creature lifts him to its face, its eyes inches from Rath's own, glaring at him.

"You ... cannot do this. Obey me ... I command it. Sete ... please..."

The monstrous infant opens its fanged mouth and envelops Rath's head. It bites down, and I hear the wet crunch of splintering bone. Rath's body spasms and dances, then falls with a dull thud to the blood-slicked cobbles. The *vod'hule* spits out the head, and it lands with a sodden thud beside Napaula and me.

Horribly, Rath's eyes are still open, still frantically shifting to and fro. His mouth opens and closes, lips and tongue forming the denials he no longer has breath to voice.

Shocked, I look at him with my secret sight and see the dark tendrils, still linking him with his creation. The thing, by its very existence, is keeping him alive.

A flicker of motion draws my eye away from the grisly sight. I look past Rath's still-living remains, and see Nauaula's shade, standing before the *vod'hule*.

She appears much the same in death as she did in life, ancient and decrepit, but also larger somehow, more vibrant. I am reminded that this is a woman who, through the sheer force of her will, kept in contact with her dead son's spirit, singing to him for decades. Holding him to her in denial of death's imperative. She looks up at the thing before her, her gaze unwavering. In it burns a fierce, bottomless love.

The creature sways under the force of her regard, the blackness contained within it spinning faster and

faster. I do not need my mortal sight to know the thing's eyes are shifting between red and white, as Sete's soul struggles against Napaula's son.

Napaula's ghost holds out her hands, beseeching, and I see her son's face rise from the surface of the roiling black. It is tiny, an infant's visage. For the first time, I see the baby he was meant to be, clean-limbed and fair of face.

His eyes shine white. White as snow. White as the noonday sun, and as bright. He slips free of his prison of flesh and bone, and drifts down to his mother's waiting embrace.

I do not hear Sete's scream of frustration, for she has no lungs to give such a cry, but I sense it nonetheless, a silent wail of thwarted ambition. The *vod'hule* thrashes, its undead body racked with shudders, then claws savagely at itself, as if only by inflicting pain can the necromancer's soul maintain its tenuous foothold on the land of the living.

I ignore it. I know she is done here. Already, I see out of the corner of my eye the dark fabric of its spiritual essence shredding, like smoke in the wind. The souls it has wrapped itself in are tearing free, moving on to their final destination beyond the Vale.

I look away, focusing instead on the sight of Napaula, holding her son. The love shining in her eyes pierces me, more painful than a sword, unbearably sweet.

They look at me, and Napaula nods her thanks. I smile back, unable to return the gesture. I did not do this. She did.

Then they are gone, moving swiftly across the Vale, shrinking until they are no more.

The *vod'hule* screams, a sound no mortal ear can hear, deafeningly loud nonetheless. A shriek of the mind and spirit. I see Sete's soul, no longer anchored to its stolen flesh, ripping free of its moorings, dragged back to the dark lands it came from.

With a rustle like a million crows' wings, the *vod'hule*, along with the countless thousands of sweetlings standing in the courtyard, crumbles into ash and dust.

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CHAPTER TWENTY-NINE

At the far side of the square, beneath the still-shut gates of the Imperial Palace, knots of healers tend to the officers and the remaining mages still within the reach of their goddess's mercy. I look for Lia, and find her eventually, a spot of blue and white surrounded by the rainbow of her fellow elementalists.

Ash swirls through the square like black snow, all that remains of Rath's seemingly invincible army. The fires are mostly out, now that the pyromancers and hydromancers can do their work, the angry orange sky glow dimmed once more to the cold black of winter. The ash coats everyone and everything, smudging clothes and faces, acrid and gritty on my tongue. Some part of me realizes that what I am smelling, what I am *tasting*, is the remains of countless mingled Mor and human bodies. Lanterns and torches are brought and set up around the perimeter of the square, their light feeble, but sufficient, in the dying firelight.

I do not bother waiting for the priests of Shanira to refuse to help me. Instead, I turn aside and join the flood of walking wounded streaming down the Gold Road, away from the stench of burning and the greasy taste of ash. As I limp along, I feel the soldiers' stares on my skin, tickling like fly tracks. I raise my soot-stained hood, covering my silver hair, and hurry on as best I can. Eventually, I am swallowed up in the flood of humanity, just another casualty amongst thousands of others.

Dawn is a dim, blue promise in the east when I find my way back to Mistress Lauran's house. Wounded are everywhere, officers mostly, along with a scattering of well-dressed citizens. Some moan or scream, in pain. Others lie still. All bear the marks of blood and ash and smoke. I wait for the better part of an hour, huddled at the rear of the common area, before the mistress of the house finally sees me. She must have heard something of what transpired under the gates, for moments later she takes me in back, away from the stares and the screams.

Lauran gives my wounds a cursory examination in a tiny, cloth-walled cubicle, then orders her staff to put me in the same room where I convalesced on my first day in the Imperial City. They take me upstairs, to the white-walled room and its canopied bed, then help me out of my blood-caked clothes. I stand, shivering, as they wash the dirt and filth from my body with cloths and warm water. When I am clean, I sink into the cool, crisp sheets, falling into an exhausted daze.

I wait hours for Lauran to come and repair the damage to my body. Time passes slowly, measured by the hourly chimes from the clock in the hall and the throbbing in my battered body. Occasionally, a scream drifts into the room through the thick door.

Lauran comes to me when evening is thick in the sky. She enters with a brusque knock, wiping her hands on a cloth. Her eyes are bloodshot and ringed with the bruises of exhaustion, but her hands are as gentle as ever as she tends to the wound in my thigh. She tells me it is deep, well into the muscle, and will take weeks to properly heal.

"You'll need to exercise it regularly, just as soon as the stitches set up, or it might permanently stiffen," she says. "With luck, you should get back most, if not all, of its use, but that's up to you and how hard you're willing to work."

I promise her solemnly that I will heed her advice.

As soon as she is done wrapping my leg she turns to the long slash across my cheek and brow. Her fingers probe the edges of the wound with gentle insistence, and I hiss as the wound protests.

"You're lucky to have your eye. A bit more pressure and—"

"Yes," I echo, dully. "Very lucky."

Lauran looks at me, frowning. "Yes, you are, and don't forget it. Luckier than thousands of others this day at any rate."

I blink at her, roused from the thick fog of self-pity that envelops me. My mouth opens in preparation of an angry retort.

Do not dare to raise your voice to your healer, my sister barks in my head, her tone appalled. *She means well and you know it.*

I close my mouth, feeling ashamed and foolish and very, very tired.

She cleans the slice and sutures the edges shut, using careful, tight stitches. Despite her gentle touch, the treatment brings tears to my eyes and I struggle to remain still and not cry. When she is done, she hands me a mirror, and I examine the result.

The wound is a line of reddened flesh, closed with tight, black hash marks of thread. It runs diagonally, up from the corner of my jaw and across my cheekbone, ending just below my eye before continuing again through my brow and up across my forehead.

"I fear it will scar, despite the closeness of the stitches. It should have been closed hours ago, but there were others with injuries more severe. I'm sorry."

"I understand," I say, wondering if the reproach I hear in her voice is really there, or is merely an artifact constructed by my sense of guilt.

"It will itch abominably when it starts healing," she continues, "so you must resist the urge to scratch or pick. Do you understand?"

I nod and hand her back the mirror. I do not tell her that I could not care less if the wound scars or not. Let it. Let it face me in the mirror every single day, a reminder of my pride and my foolishness.

Lauran looks at me for a moment, her gaze thoughtful. She draws breath to speak, then seems to think better of it, and lets it out again, unused. She turns, her things gathered in her skirt, and opens the door.

A Gray Circle man stands in the hall, guarding the door. They have not left my side. I cannot tell if they are there to protect me, or to protect others from me.

Knowing the count, probably both.

I sigh and lower myself to the thick pillows, sighing as my battered body protests. My face feels hot and swollen, and my leg throbs in time with my heart. I stare through the window, at the weeping gray sky, as night spreads its black cloak across the rooftops.

I spend the next two days in Mistress Lauran's house. My only visitors are the servants who check my dressings four times a day. After breakfast, and again before dinner, Lauran herself comes in to poke at my sutures and to be sure I am using the salve she commanded I rub into them at every dressing change.

Several times I consider simply leaving; I am well enough to travel home, and I would prefer to heal in my own narrow bed. Every time I try to leave, I am stopped by the Gray Circle man at the door.

"The count desires you to stay here and heal properly," is the usual answer, delivered in a polite but firm tone that brooks no disagreement.

I do not know when the Gray Circle tracked me here, or how many of them guard the healing house. For all I know, they followed me all the way from the Gold Road to Mistress Lauran's front door. The idea reassures and troubles me in equal measure.

I cannot see the aftermath of the Mor attack from my vantage point, but from my window I can see the cloud of smoke and dust hanging in the air near the Lion's Mouth. The sound of hammers can be heard, even through the closed pane, day and night, and I must assume that work to replace the shattered gate is proceeding. My guards, despite my repeated questions, will tell me nothing, saying only that the count will be along soon to speak with me.

As frustrated as this lack of information is, it pales in comparison to my hunger for knowledge of Lia. The last time I saw her, she was battered and bruised, dazed with shock at the death of her father. Lost and alone. I wonder where she is now; who is consoling her.

I look down at my hands, recalling the sensation of my borrowed sword chopping into Argus Cho's neck, the blade parting muscle and vertebrae; recall the feel of his dead flesh twisting and shifting in preparation for the imminent birth of the sweetling inside of him.

What must she be feeling now, after my refusal to heal him against his will? After she watched me decapitate him? Does she even know I still live? Does she *care*?

The desire to go to her is overwhelming, and I find myself in the hall, struggling with the Gray Circle guard. My voice rises from a whisper to a full-throated shout before Mistress Lauran comes to silence us.

"This is a house of healing, not a cliffside tavern!" she hisses at us. "You will be quiet, or you can leave right this instant!"

"Fine, I'll go," I say.

"My orders are for her to remain here until the count comes to collect her," the guard replies at the same moment. "I apologize for my behavior, mistress."

The guard's good manners shame me into silence, and I retreat back to my room.

On the third day, Count Savard comes to visit me. I look up from my breakfast tray as the door opens, revealing his slender form.

He looks terrible. Dark circles ring his dog-brown eyes, and deep creases frame his narrow mouth. His complexion is sallow, and his unwashed hair, limp and sparse at the best of times, stands up in a greasy mat.

Still, he is a noble. I put down my fork and lean forward, preparing to haul myself up on my good leg. Savard waves aside the gesture and drops into the chair beside the bed.

"Gods above and below," he mumbles, rubbing his eyes, "it is a madhouse out there."

"What news of Lia?" I say, ignoring his opening. "I've been here for days and I've had no news at all, nor been allowed visitors. Your men haven't done me the courtesy of even—"

"You're here in secret because if people knew you were here, they'd storm the doors, break them down, and drag you, screaming, to their idea of justice. You'd be dead, yes, as would mistress Lauran and gods know how many others for sheltering you. I told Lady Cho where you were, because I know I can trust her discretion, but none other."

I blink at his words, then nod. I had feared such a reaction from the city's populace, but hearing it said so bluntly rocks me back. Still, my pride will not allow me to meekly submit to this man. Not after all I have endured.

"Well, at least allow me visitors, then. If Lia would be allowed to come to me, I—"

"My men are under no orders to turn Lady Cho aside," Savard says softly. "If she has not visited, then it is none of my doing."

I blink into his eyes, seeing the trace of a smile at the corner of his droll mouth. I feel the red tide of the blood magic shift in time to the pulsing of my anger, slithering in my belly.

The sensation evokes a feeling of revulsion so intense that I must turn aside, gagging.

"In any event," he presses on, as if my choking were inconsequential, "perhaps you will allow me to properly brief you on the current situation with the Mor?"

I nod and spit a thick glob of bile-tinged spit into the bedpan on the table. Inside, my sister gasps at this most unladylike behavior, and despite myself, I must smile. Even now, after everything we have endured, she still cares about such trivialities.

The count tells me, quickly and efficiently, of the efforts underway to repair the shattered Lion's Mouth. About the rediscovery of long-dormant construction engines, and of the geomancers and their heroic efforts to repair the sundered stone of the gates.

He tells me the remaining Mor have retreated, heading back to their mountain lairs in droves. Scouts have followed them as far as the entrances to their caves but no further. Already dozens of doorways have been discovered.

"It was a bad defeat for them, so there's the possibility they won't come back," the count says, rubbing his eyes. "But the emperor does not want to count on that, and neither do I, so we're shifting troops here, to protect the City and the cliffside cranes and the Gold Road. We lost many troops, more than two thirds of the city's defenders, so we have had to recall troops from as far away as Greenwich, nearly one hundred miles distant.

He turns away to stare out the darkened window. "The decision has left many of the Armitage's guardhouses either lightly defended or abandoned altogether. If they decide to return, or if their retreat is a feint, then they'll have any number of places to cross."

"Then we should protect that which is most important: the people," I reply, "The emperor must command the refugees to remain here, in the city, where they can be defended. The winter will be easier to endure within the city as well. I'm sure the Mor destroyed every granary and warehouse they could find. Anyone who tries to go home will be in danger of starvation."

Savard nods. "A good suggestion, one the emperor shares. If the winter is long, it will be more than a year until the farmers can plant again. Thank the gods the southern lands were not affected; our storehouses will be empty from having to support so many by the time of the first thaws."

"What now?" I ask, after the silence lying between us has deepened for a time. "Surely you didn't come here just to tell me the good news of the enemy's retreat?"

The count shakes his head. "No. Not just for that reason. I've come to tell you what the emperor has decided to do with you."

"Do? What do you mean? We've won, sir, and driven the enemy back. With luck, we will all be dust before they decide to emerge again."

"Lady Kirin, please. You and I both know this is not over." The count's eyes go hard when he says this, like age-darkened amber. Any human warmth I might have seen in them is gone, submerged beneath the mask of the emperor's spymaster. Still, I cannot help but to try.

"Of course it is," I laugh. I hear the tension in the sound, the quiver of dread. I know he does as well. "I came here to fight the Mor, and that's what I did. Now that they're gone, I plan to spend my days with those I love. I'm through with the court and the army. The first thing I mean to do is burn my leathers and learn to dress like a proper lady."

The count sighs and walks to the clock on the mantel, then adjusts the hands on its face minutely. He turns to me, his face grave.

"Surely you don't think it will be that easy?" he asks. "Do you really think that someone of your ... abilities ... can live here as if nothing ever happened? Thousands saw what happened in the square. By now the entire city knows of it. Do you really imagine there is a single person within the city who doesn't know your name? The emperor cannot let such a thing stand unanswered. He must do something."

A chill twists through my spine. Of course the emperor would want something done about me. I share Rath's knowledge of necromancy, a power that nearly destroyed us all, even as it spared us from the Mor. Such a weapon cannot lie on the ground, unused; men like Savard will not allow it.

"So he has sent his chief assassin to be rid of me?" I ask, pushing down the cold panic unfolding in my stomach. I feel the blood magic respond to my fear, but grip it savagely, teeth bared in a snarl of concentration. No matter what, I will not let it out, even of the cost is my own life. I will not.

Savard shrugs. If he notices the effort in my face, he does not show it. "That, milady, is entirely up to you."

"I don't understand," I hiss. "Have you come to capture me then? To hold me in some dank cell in case the emperor has use for me? I warn you now, I will never use my talents again, or pass on what I know. There is nothing you can do to make me."

He looks at me then, his expression softening, approaching something approaching humor. His eyes sparkle with black amusement. "Don't be so sure, milady. I'm something of an expert in the art of ... persuasion. Pray I never need demonstrate my own skills."

I sit, motionless, refusing to respond to his threat. The count shakes his head, as if regretting his words. He sighs, and scrubs his hand through his tangled hair.

"In any case," he continues, "if you are to remain in the City, there are certain arrangements we'll have to make. The changing of your physical appearance, for example. The establishment of a new household. Something modest, of course, but elegant, as befits your status. Something close to the palace."

"I already told you, sir, I will never—"

"The emperor is many things, milady," the count interrupts, his voice soft and steely as a rapier in a satin sheath, "but wasteful is not one of them. He values those who can assist him in ruling the Empire. In defending it. But he also is a cautious man, who never ignores a threat to his power. I beg you, do not spurn his offer."

I think on this for a time, listening to the gentle tick of the clock. A chime sounds, announcing the

newly-minted hour. I sigh and look up from where my hands have twisted themselves in the bed sheets, and force myself to let them go.

"I can advise him. For as long as he has need of me, I will share what wisdom I have with him and his generals. But I will never ... never ... use my powers, for him or for anyone else. Even if he commands you to break my body, I will resist you with everything I am. Do you hear me?"

"Yes, yes, of course, milady, if that's how it must be," he replies with a mocking bow. I can tell he does not believe me. He thinks I will break my promise, one way or another, either as a result of his will or from my own weakness.

Let him. He did not see the look in Napaula's face when she looked at her son. He is not a mother, and can never know a fraction of that satisfaction, of that love. Let him think he can make a pawn of me, if that is what it will take to leave this room alive, and to see Lia's face once again.

Savard retrieves his cloak from the chair and shrugs it over his shoulders. "I'll make the necessary arrangements. Yusif will come to collect you later this evening. I've already taken the liberty of finding you a selection of homes; all you have to do is chose one."

"That won't be necessary," I rely. "I already have a house, and I will not leave it."

He pauses in the doorway, but does not look back. The gesture deepens the anxiety tightening my chest.

"Talk to Lia, then, but know my offer stands if you need it." He walks out, his boots clomping on the wooden floor boards.

"Wait!" I call out, rising from the bed. The tray tumbles to the floor, knocked aside in my haste to follow him. "What have you heard?"

I hurry into the hall, and am stopped by the guard's raised hand. "What have you heard?" I call out again, uncaring if the count or Mistress Luran or even the gods themselves take offense at my tone.

He does not stop, or even slow, his reply floating back to me from the staircase.

"Talk to Lia."

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CHAPTER THIRTY

Rain falls from the leaden sky. It soaks through leather and wool, running in chill rivulets down shivering skin. The wind blows the fat drops slant-wise, enough to defeat the umbrellas and hoods the small knot of mourners have brought to protect themselves.

I stand beside the simple grave, one of hundreds of fresh wounds in the soil of Griffin Park. I shift my weight from foot to foot, trying to ease the pain of my wounded leg. It throbs along with my heart, sending stabbing lances of discomfort through me every time I shift. My face itches, just as Luran warned me it would.

The priest hurries through the ceremony, inspired either by the rain or by the waiting scores of funerals he must doubtless perform this day. I barely hear him.

Beside me Yusif stands, hood thrown back, the rain running down to drip from his beak nose. Other members of the Gray Circle lurk at a discreet distance, their dark cloaks almost invisible against the leafless trees. On the other side of the freshly-turned earth stands Lia, head bowed beneath a black oilcloth umbrella. At her side is Westyn Obarre, the hydromancer. As I watch, I see Obarre reach out and encircle Lia's shoulders, squeezing them in a brief hug.

Lia looks hale and healthy, her bruises faded to a dim green mottle. At least someone has been able to enjoy the attentions of the priests of Shanira. Good.

The priest completes the ritual and the coffin is lowered into the ground. I know that one of Yusif's tasks here is to assure that no one opens that box. It contains nothing but ashes, but the count is taking no chances.

Yusif has told me that Savard believed the body of the stone baby was too dangerous to lie unguarded in the ground. As soon as it was obvious that the bodies of the dead were staying dead, both he and his mother were cremated. It was my idea to mingle the remains in a single urn: the gesture seemed appropriate, a physical echo of Napaula's and her son's intertwined souls.

I know the child's spirit is in the Beyond, with its mother's, and poses no further threat, but let the count pay to properly inter Napaula and her son in the tranquil expanse of Griffin Park if it makes him feel better. I wonder how long the Gray Circle will guard the gravesite and its unmarked headstone. Years, unless I miss my guess about the count.

The coffin reaches the bottom of the grave with a hollow thump, and we all step forward to toss in a handful of muddy earth. I feel nothing: I know that what lies below are simply shells. That Napaula is in a better place, beyond the Vale, with her beloved son. I wipe away water on my cheek, water that is not tears, certainly not.

The small assembly breaks up as workmen begin shoveling earth into the hole. The priest hurries across the wet grass to his next ceremony. His page follows behind, struggling beneath the weight of his holy books and the umbrella he uses to keep his master somewhat dry. Lia and Westyn stand on the other side of the grave, talking softly. He looks up at me when I approach, his expression full of fear and anger, tinged with a loathing I know all too well.

"I'm glad you survived the battle, master hydromancer," I say politely. It seems a safe enough sentiment.

He nods, the expression shifting into defensiveness, and I realize that, even with such banality, I have chosen poorly. "I was at the river at Master Cho's command, ready to fight the fires. I wish I could have

been in the square with you and Lia ... Lady Cho, I mean."

"No, you do not," Lia says softly, her eyes still on the lid of the coffin that even now disappears beneath spade-fulls of dark brown soil.

Obarre nods, his youthful face chagrined, even as his eyes shine with stubborn defiance. Fool.

"Westyn, will you please leave us?" Lia asks. "I will meet you later."

"I..." he begins, ready to disagree. Lia looks at him and pats his hand. The gesture twists something sharp and jagged in my guts.

"Of course," he relents, bowing to her. "Lady Kirin," he says with a nod.

"Master hydromancer," I reply, inclining my head. My eyes never leave Lia. "You too, Yusuf," I add.

"I won't be far, but you'll have your privacy," he promises. He signals to one of the men standing across the lawn and then heads towards the waiting carriages.

"Shall we get out of the rain?" Lia asks.

"Please. Let's go home."

Lia hesitates, the gesture speaking volumes. Then she nods, moving mechanically towards the carriage. I take her arm, and she allows me to place her hand in the crook of my elbow.

We do not speak, all the way to the carriage. We ride through the streets in silence. I want to say something—anything—to break the wall that sits between us, but I do not know how to begin. My sister, bless her, says not a word.

Finally, we reach our quiet street. The carriage draws up to the front door, and we hurry out. The rain has stopped, thank the gods for small favors, but the chill is deepening.

All of this will freeze, I think to myself idly, then shrug. At least we had a few days for the water to wash clean the streets, and to help put out the last of the fires. I wonder if the aeromancers had anything to do with that, then almost laugh at my own question. Of course they did.

Lia unlocks the door and we go inside. In the kitchen, I pour wine, and we drink to Napaula and to her son. I offer up a toast for all the men and women, soldiers and elementalists, who died atop the wall and under the Lion's Mouth, and Lia offers up a silent tribute, to her father I assume.

Lia shivers as she puts her glass down. "I need to get out of these wet clothes," she says, walking out of the room. I follow her into the hall and up the stairs. She stops in the doorway of her bedroom, her eyes frank and beseeching.

I step close to her. Lia reaches up and traces the line of my wounding, her fingertip cool against my burning cheek. She shivers, a gesture I choose to interpret as lust, and I lean forward to kiss her. She breaks free and backs into the bedroom, and I follow her inside.

We move together, tenderly at first, hesitantly, mouths hot against chill skin. She seems distant, her hands and lips languid, lying motionless on the cool sheets. I move against her, urgent, trying to break through the wall that, even now, seems to separate us. Eventually, my efforts are rewarded with a gasp, and Lia's caresses grow rougher, more hurried. Her breathing grows short.

As her passion grows, our lovemaking changes, until we are clawing at each other like animals. Tears

stand in her eyes, from pain or from grief, I do not know. I do not want to hurt her, but she demands it, urging me on to greater depths of abandon, until I surrender myself to her desires and use my nails and teeth, biting and scratching until red marks stand out, livid, on her freckled skin.

When the flood tide of my climax is past, I hold her, our limbs intertwined. She clutches me, her grip almost painfully tight, then, muscle by muscle, I feel her grow tense, rigid. Soon, she pushes me aside with clumsy hands, and rolls away.

We lie, side by side, staring at the ceiling. Despite the intensity of my release, I do not feel better. The emptiness I felt at the graveside, pushed back for a time, flows back, like a black tide.

Lia rises and walks to the basin in the corner. She soaks a cloth in the chill water and rubs it over herself. I see gooseflesh rise on her shoulders and across the welts crisscrossing her back. When she cleans between her legs, she shivers, and gasps.

"Lia, dear heart, what are you doing?" I ask, rising on my elbows.

"I want you to go," she says, simply. "I have already had servants pack up your things. Not that there was much to pack. I will be moving out as well, back to my father's ... my estate. The house will be sold, and that will be that."

My already-forced smile fossilizes, hardening into a brittle mask. The bed seems to sway beneath me, like a ship's deck in high seas. I force myself to take a long, measured breath. "I don't understand," I say, not needing my sister's admonition to know I am lying, but speaking the words nonetheless.

She whirls, the washcloth clenched in one white-knuckled fist. Her eyes blaze, not with lightning, but with emotion, a volatile, swirling mix as bright and hot as the inside of a kiln.

"Understand? What do you not understand? My father is dead, Kirin! *Dead!* And you could have saved him!"

I smile sadly and shake my head. "No, love. I couldn't. He didn't want it. I had to respect his wishes."

"Had to," she parrots, her voice mocking. "Because you are so honorable and dedicated to respecting the desires of others, is that it? As you respected the wishes of Lord Garrett? As you respected *mine* when you put your power inside of me? When you used my blood to keep Napaula alive? Is that the respect you speak of?" She is screaming now, her cheeks flushed.

I force myself to meet her gaze, facing the mix of anger and shame I see in them. "Nothing good has ever come from my power, Lia. You were right to take me to task for using them. I ... I only wanted you to see I was willing to put aside my own desires and honor your father's. I'm so sorry for what happened. I'd take it back if I could. I'd take back so many things."

She blinks at me, and I see the bonfire of her emotions dim, like a furnace door closing. Her mouth sets into a grim line, and she nods, once, the gesture mechanical. She bends her head and gives her body one last wipe, then drops the cloth into the basin.

"If only we could turn back time, but we cannot," she mutters, her voice as cold as her eyes. She walks to the wardrobe and belts a robe over her nakedness. "I want you out. Now. I will have your things sent to you."

I sit up, the covers bunched in my lap. "Lia, we can still make this work," I plead. "What happened ... it's a tragedy, I know, but we will rebuild. We'll come out of this stronger, I know it."

Liar, my sister whispers. *When will you stop saying what you hope will pass and accept that which already has?*

Lia walks to the bedside and reaches out, tentatively. She traces the line of my scar with a trembling hand, then cups my cheek. I place mine atop it, pressing her palm to my face.

I look into her eyes, and see no trace of the fire that scalded me before. Once, their azure brilliance shone like the summertime sky, warm and vibrant and alive. When she was angry, the light danced there like lightning, and when she smiled, I could bask in their radiance like the sun. Now all I see now is the polar blue of glaciers, hard and impenetrable as armor.

She shakes her head. "I do not want to do this any more. I want ... I *need* ... to be alone. Having you here only reminds me of everything I have lost."

"What about...?" I begin, then stop. *What about all I've lost? What about everything you're asking me to give up?* I want to say. To scream.

I leave the words unspoken. No. I can see she has made up her mind. I said I wanted Lia to be more independent, to become her own woman, but I did not want it like this. *Be careful what you wish for*, my mother often told me. I should have listened.

I rise from the tangled sheets and gather my scattered clothes. She watches me from the corner of the bed as I get dressed. I feel self-conscious in her gaze, awkward, and I hurry through the process with as much grace as I can muster.

When I am done, I walk to her side and bend down, breathing in the smell of her, a blend of her perfume and the rain and the musk of our lovemaking. She kisses me, one last, chaste pressing of the lips, then lies down. She rolls over, turning her back to me.

I move to the door, swaying across a floor made suddenly unstable, like the dizzy platforms of a fun house. I clutch the frame as I pass.

"Kirin," Lia says, and I stop. "I have something for you in my writing desk. Top drawer. Your name is on it. Please ... do not open it until you are gone."

"What is it?" I ask.

"Just ... do me this favor and open it when you are gone. Please?"

I nod and walk out. My feet are wooden and clumsy on the stair. Downstairs, I cross to Lia's desk and there, in the top drawer amongst a scattering of old invitations, find a heavy envelope. My name is written on the front in Lia's elegant hand. Something is inside, something hard and angular.

I take the envelope and turn towards the front door. I fumble it open, not bothering to put on my cloak, and step into the crisp evening air. The carriage waits for me at the curb. I see Yusuf peer out through the window. When he sees me, he opens the door and hops down, setting the wooden stairs on the street with his own hands.

"Where would you like to go, milady?" he asks politely, his eyes curious. He must see my pain; surely all the world can see the blasted wasteland in my eyes. He says nothing.

"Take me to my house," I reply.

"But ... it's late, milady. Perhaps we can look over your choices in the morning? The count has an

extensive list..."

"I don't care which one," I reply. "Whatever the count desires. Just take me away from here."

"As you wish," he says, then hops down to speak with the driver. I hear him give an address, then command one of his men to go fetch the factors.

The smell of the carriage, a mingled aroma of polished wood, fabric, and the farm smell of well-tended horses, evokes a memory: Lia and I, climbing aboard a carriage not so different from this one, on our way to her father's ball. I remember her smiling at me, the fiery orange lines of the *naraja* illuminating her womanly curves, reflecting from her sky-blue eyes. Remember the look of devilish amusement, and affection, in those eyes; the way her fingertips brushed my flesh, hinting at the rest of the evening's delights.

I settle back in the deep cushions and run my hand across the seat where Lia sat, just hours ago. I turn and look out the window, craning my face up, until I see Lia's bedroom window.

I see her, standing behind the leaded glass panes, her hands holding open the curtains. She stares down at me. I cannot be sure through the rain-streaked glass, but it looks as if she is crying. I would like to think she is, anyway; I know I am, my tears stinging my scarred cheek.

I raise my hand. As soon as I do, she steps back, into the gloom. The curtain drops across the window, as final as the falling of a headsman's axe. Yusif climbs inside and thumps the carriage roof, and we are off.

I look back, one last time, as the carriage departs the tranquil street. I never thought of this place as home, not until it was too late, and now I shall never see it again. I look at the house. The curtains are still closed across Lia's bedroom window. I settle back, my eyes on the velvet roof of the compartment, and do not look out the window again until I feel the carriage turn onto the main street.

I look at the envelope still clutched in my fist and slide a finger beneath the flap. The sealing wax cracks with a tiny sound. I tilt it, and a comb drops out, into my palm. It is small, shaped like a butterfly, its cloisonne wings and tortoiseshell teeth gleaming in the wan light. There is a paper inside the envelope, a letter from Lia to her bankers, commanding them to give me a sum of money as well as a line of credit "for the continued maintenance of the bearer, for as long as she shall require it".

I remember the comb, gleaming in the candlelight, nestled amongst Lia's auburn curls. Remember Lia's warm smile and her blush as I slid her gown from her shoulders. Remember the scrape of its wings against my thigh as she bent to kiss me.

I rub my thumb across a smudge marring one of the wings, and my body heat coaxes the dried residue of the *naraja* into warm, orange radiance. A sob wells up in my throat, choking me, and I turn my face away, not wanting Yusif to see.

The paper relents to my fingers' pressure, ripping lengthwise. I tear it again, and again, until nothing is left of the note or the envelope but tiny shreds. My sister says nothing; I can sense she is not, for once, appalled at my actions.

I open the window, admitting a gust of icy wind, and hold out my hand, scattering the fragments into the night. Yusif watches me, his dark eyes solemn. He, too, is silent. I look at the butterfly comb and cock back my fist, ready to throw it into the darkness, but some instinct, some residue of emotion, stays my hand. A moment later, I close the window, then drop the butterfly into my pocket.

I came to the city to fight the Mor. To revenge myself on them. Now they are gone, broken and retreating, skulking back to the earth that bred them.

I reach for the hate that has borne me up for so long, that has given me the strength to carry on, and find it missing. There is nothing inside me but an empty hole, as dark and cold as the catacombs beneath Rath's family estate. All my rage, all my hatred and passion and, yes, love, are gone. I am a hollow thing, a woman made of paper and rotted lathing, blowing with whatever chance wind will carry me.

You kept your promise, my sister whispers, barely loud enough to hear over the creak of the carriage. *When it would have been easy to chose death, you chose life instead, and reunited Napaula with her son. That must be worth something.*

I nod, not because I agree but out of some reflex. I sense her, wanting to say more. She remains silent.

I stare out the window at the cobbled streets, and at the blank facades of the houses passing by. Some things cannot be changed, no matter how much we wish it. Sometimes our most heartfelt desires do not come to pass. And always ... always ... we must take ownership, and responsibility, for the things we have paid for.

I lie back and close my eyes, surrendering myself to the tide that pulls me, a river winding its way through the unknowable night.

-The End-

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