
Nights of
Blood
and
Magic
MIA K. ROSE

Nights of Blood and Magic

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Nights of Blood and Magic

MIA K. ROSE



ROSE QUILL

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Also by Mia K Rose

From the Cold

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For those who would burn the world
for the ones they love.

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Content Warnings



This novel contains topics and descriptions that some readers may find confronting or distressing. Reader discretion is advised.

- Bloodletting / Ritual Magic (not intended to promote self-harm)
- Blood / Gore
- Daemon Possession
- Death / Murder
- Imprisonment / Persecution

If you are sensitive to any of the above, please consider your comfort and well-being while reading.

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Pronunciation Guide



Characters

- Idonea: ih-DOH-nee-uh
- Lysander: ly-SAN-der
- Lance: LANS
- Alcaeus: al-SEE-us
- Nellith: NEL-ith
- Dyota: dye-OH-tah
- Kitsa: KIT-sah
- Elzhbeta: elzh-BEH-tah
- Safira: sah-FEE-rah
- Kerem: keh-REM

Places

- Draugaros: DROW-gah-ross
- Thalorica: tha-LORE-ih-kah
- Myrelion: mih-REL-ee-on
- Borgomir Republic: BOR-go-meer ree-PUB-lik
- Zorya: ZOR-yah
- Krylovan: KREE-loh-vahn
- Rusegrad: ROO-seh-grad
- Qoruul: koh-ROOL
- Vazduhului: vaz-doo-HOO-loo-ee

Other

- Iaculus: YAH-koo-loos

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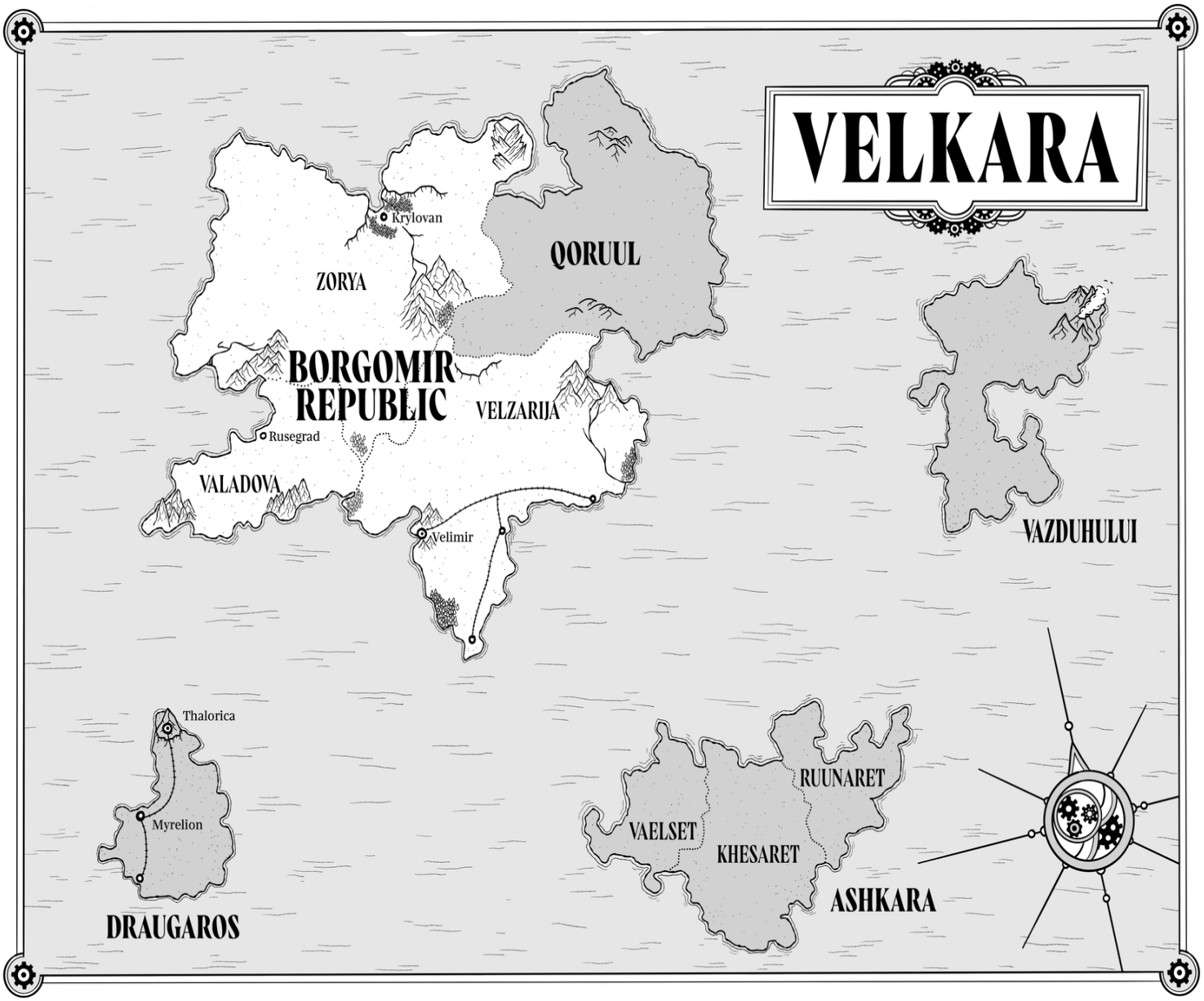
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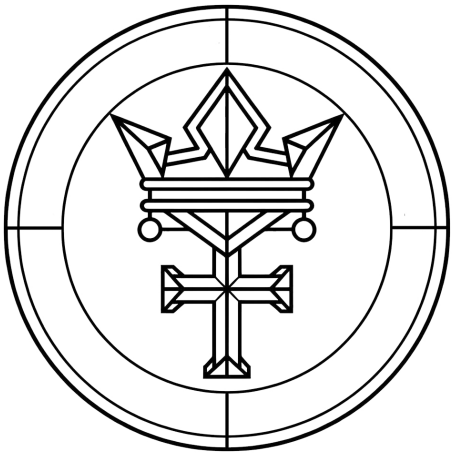
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Chapter I

The train hissed like a warning, but Idonea disembarked anyway. No one said no to her mother.

The whistle split the night behind her, sharp enough to set her teeth on edge. Wheels ground against the rails, and the engine dragged itself away from the platform in a wash of smoke and hot metal. She stood still until the last carriage vanished into the dark between the pines.

Long enough to pretend she was deciding something. She wasn't.

Mist clung to her glasses. Idonea wiped it away with her sleeve and caught the thin yellow glow of a gas lamp in the lens. The train yard sat below Thalorica, pressed into the mountain's shadow like a guilty thought. Above, the skyport burned with light, all brass spars and mooring spires, though no dirigibles waited there. Too much wind off the sea, too many sensible captains elsewhere.

Jasmine grew wild along the platform fence. Soot had settled over the flowers until the sweetness came bruised and dirty. Draugaros always smelled like it was trying to survive rot.

Idonea adjusted the strap of her satchel and started upwards. Her boots struck the frosted cobbles too loudly. The cold gathered first at her neck, then beneath her collar, needling along the new scars and old ones alike. Every breath tasted of smoke, iron, and alchemical leavings from the lower factories. She catalogued it without meaning to. Nothing dangerous enough to stop for.

A woman sat on the stoop of a shuttered shop, sorting salt-blessed pebbles by lamplight. Her fingers were black to the second knuckle; a salt-cutter. The stain never washed out, not with vinegar, not with ash soap, and not with blood. Nellith told her that when Idonea was seven and still believed hands revealed the shape of a life. She'd been wrong, of course, hands lied as well as mouths.

The woman didn't look up, and Idonea didn't slow.

Three streets later, footsteps sounded behind her. Not the salt-cutter. The steps kept to her pace with careful, irritating patience.

Idonea slid one hand into her satchel, brushing past bone dust, thread, three vials. The salt was the second from the left, stoppered with cork. She found it by touch, tipped a pinch into her palm, and flicked it over shoulder without turning.

The footsteps didn't falter. Spirits stopped at salt. Anything half-born from the Current recoiled from it. Whatever followed her had either a body, a master, or a hunger too old for common warding.

Her fingers found the stiletto at her hip, which bled her more often than anyone else.

The footsteps followed her through every turn. Thalorica's lamps flickered as she passed, throwing shadows across the cobbles. She kept her eyes forward. Shadows in this city always had bad manners, sometimes worse. As a girl she'd once asked Nellith why the lamps were kept so low if everyone knew what moved between them. *Because fear is cheaper than oil*, Nellith had replied. It was one of the few lessons her mother never needed to repeat.

Nellith's porch light appeared at the end of the lane, small and steady, and infuriatingly welcome.

The house stood behind its crooked bronze gate, two weatherboard storeys of deep blue paint peeling like old skin. Salt had worried the iron railings into lace, and the wild garden lay dead under frost.

The footsteps quickened. So did she.

Idonea cut through the gate and crossed the garden path at a near run. Her breath shortened. She hated that, for panic wasted air.

The door gave before her shoulder. She slammed it shut behind her and dropped the iron chain into place. Her satchel hit the floor. For one still moment, she listened. But there was no breath beyond the door, nor scrape of claw or boot. She leaned close to the glass pane and saw only garden, the gate, the lamplit lane. Unease skittered across her skin.

"Nellith?" She took one measured breath.

"You're late," her mother called.

Of course. There'd be no checking as to the why. That wasn't important.

Nellith stood at the top of the spiral staircase, a figure carved of calm and stone. Silver scars spider-webbed across her warm beige skin. Her

obsidian eyes were too dark to reflect the light properly.

"We have to finish the tattoo before midnight," Nellith said.

Nellith greeted her the way she greeted weather, as an inconvenience expected to pass.

"A fine welcome," Idonea muttered.

It would be the last birthday she'd have to endure this ritual. That thought had carried her through the train ride. It'd have to carry her now.

"Well, up you come." Nellith turned towards the sanctum. "Shoes off."

Idonea looked down at her boots. For half a second she considered keeping them on to prove she was no longer a child. Then she sighed and tugged them off.

The metal stairs rattled under her bare feet. She'd never liked the sound. The sanctum waited above, close and dim, smelling of cedar, musk, dust, and old candle smoke. Dark-wood shelves lined the walls, crowded with tomes, some Nellith had forbidden her to read. No candles burned tonight, only one gas lamp flickered beside the tattoo chair.

Idonea glanced first at the rafters, then the shelves, then the shadow beneath the workbench. No Lance. Her brows drew together. Nellith's pet was never far from her.

"Where's Lance?"

"Hunting." Nellith didn't look up from the instruments laid out on the side table. "He'll be back."

It was a thin answer, and Idonea knew her mother well enough to know them.

The bone needle lay ready beside the ink pot. The ink shimmered lapis blue, too bright in the low light. No postponing it, then. No pleading fatigue, and no mentioning the thing that'd followed her. Nellith had set the hour, and the hour had arrived.

Idonea peeled off her clothes with stiff fingers. The cold made her clumsy. She folded none of it. She sat in the chair and leaned forward, arms crossed over her chest, spine exposed.

The older marks waited there, each one inked into her over the last four years. Sacred symbols, Nellith called them. Protection, when pressed, but nothing more when pressed harder.

The needle entered her skin. Pain flashed clean and white, but she didn't flinch.

Her first tattoo had been the little sleeping dragon on her inner wrist, given on her eighteenth birthday. A witch mark. That one Nellith had explained with almost tenderness. The flowers had come later, after Idonea left Draugaros and learned that her body could hold beauty without permission.

Nellith had disapproved of the lotuses. Naturally, Idonea loved them.

The needle moved again, slow and certain. Nellith's hands never trembled. Those hands used to calm her. Idonea focused on the needle instead.

Nellith worked in silence for several minutes. The needle bit, lifted, bit again. Blood warmed the small of Idonea's back before Nellith wiped it away.

“Those stars,” Nellith said, her voice subdued. “Did someone from Myrelion do them?”

Idonea’s fingers traced the stars inked across her collarbone. The stars there were fine and small, scattered as if Jovana had mapped them with breath instead of ink.

"Last Winter Solstice," she said. "Jovana did them."

“And Jovana is?”

The needle hurt less than the question. *Was*, Idonea thought. *Jovana was*.

“She was everything,” Idonea whispered, her eyes stinging with the threat of tears. “But the world didn't want her in it.”

Jovana had been wasting by then. Consumption had hollowed her cheeks and brightened her eyes until she looked half-starved. She'd tattooed the constellation slowly, stopping often to cough into a cloth she thought Idonea didn't see. Stars for remembrance, stars because she said grief needed somewhere to look. She lasted one month after.

Nellith's needle paused, only briefly. Then it entered Idonea's skin again.

All witches knew some things were not healable by the Current, even for a Riven. The Current was the living flow of magic that ran through all things. But it ran through bodies that wore out, and even the strongest witch couldn't hold a soul in flesh that no longer wanted to keep it.

“Loss makes us stronger. I learned that long before you were born,” Nellith said.

The words landed wrong. Idonea didn't know why, exactly.

Idonea closed her eyes. "That's a cold thing to say to your daughter."

"It is true." Nellith wiped blood from her lower back. "The world will give you another."

Idonea swallowed. Jovana had said the same thing days before she died. It didn’t make the emptiness after any easier.

She clenched her jaw as Nellith went over a few places again with the needle. The pain was familiar now. She wondered, idly, what she would feel like when there were no more tattoos to receive.

“Done.” Nellith cleaned it up and taped gauze over the fresh tattoo. Her fingers lingered a moment longer than necessary at the base of Idonea's spine, above the gauze. A pressure. Then she stepped back.

Idonea stood and took care, putting her clothes back on, her skin tender and each movement rippled through her back muscles, flaring with discomfort.

"How does it feel?" Nellith asked.

Idonea met her eyes. "It feels like the last one."

The skin around Nellith's eyes tightened. "Yes," Nellith said. "It is."

She moved to the side table and packed her instruments away with the same economy she'd used to lay them out. Idonea had stopped watching her mother years ago. Nellith was sixty-four, and the silver in her scars caught the gaslight in a way that the dark of her hair did not.

"Are you well, Nellith?" The question came out before she stopped it.

Nellith hands stilled over the cloths. "I am exactly as I should be."

Nellith turned. “Now,” she said, “go to the cemetery for some grave dirt.”

“I could've collected some on the way here.” Idonea took her glasses off to rub her eyes. She should’ve rested on the train ride.

“No, no.” Nellith waved her hand in dismissal. “You’ve now finished the rite. Now you must collect it.”

Idonea sucked in a deep breath. She was smart enough not to ask about postponing it. There’d be no alternative, no compromise. At the door of the sanctum, she paused and looked back.

Nellith stood at the side table with her back turned, gaslight throwing her shadow long across the floorboards. For a moment, the shadow looked wrong, too tall, too narrow. As if it belonged to something waiting behind her mother rather than to her mother herself.

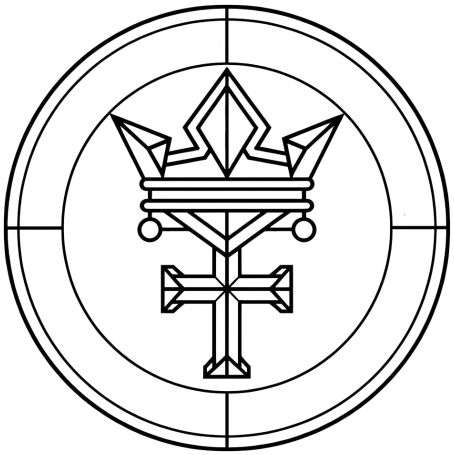
Idonea blinked, but it was only Nellith.

"I'll be back soon," Idonea said.

Nellith didn't turn.

Idonea went downstairs, pulled her boots on, tied her curls into a messy bun, and descended into the cold night.

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Chapter 2

The walk down to the cemetery punished her knees. Frost slicked the switchback path beneath her boots, and cold settled deep enough into her scars that every step pulled unpleasantly.

Thalorica buried its dead deep inside the mountain. Safer that way.

Fog thickened around the lower gates. The iron lanterns fixed into the rock walls burned weak and yellow behind cloudy glass. Draugaros let everything decay eventually.

Idonea tightened her grip on the grave jar tucked beneath her arm. The cemetery gates groaned when she pushed through. Fog dragged low between the graves, swallowing the lower markers entirely. Stone angels rose headless from the mist, marble hands reaching from whiteness towards nothing.

Idonea preferred cemeteries that made noise; silence hid too much.

She crossed between the graves carefully, boots sinking into wet earth. Some headstones held fresh flowers sealed beneath frost, while others had collapsed inward completely, names eaten away by mildew and time. She stopped before the statue Nellie preferred for grave collections: a massive winged woman carved from pale stone, her face weathered smooth by mountain rain. Moss climbed one cracked wing.

The grave beneath belonged to a magistrate who'd drowned in a river fifty years ago. Nellith claimed drowned corpses produced stronger grave dirt.

She drove the spade into the earth. Cold mud resisted then gave. The smell rose immediately; wet roots, rot and old stone. Idonea dug carefully as bare skin touching grave dirt contaminated ritual work. The spade slipped suddenly.

"Consarn." Her glove scraped the loose soil. She checked the leather automatically but found no tear. *Good*.

The jar filled slowly. When it reached the neck, Idonea dropped three silver scales into the pit as payment. The dead disliked theft; so did older things. She covered the offering carefully, then pressed a pinecone into the dirt.

The fog shifted. Idonea straightened immediately, her hand finding the knife at her hip. Nothing, only mist dragging itself between gravestones. She screwed the lid onto the jar and left the cemetery faster than she entered it.

The climb back towards the upper streets burned her lungs. Frost silvered the stone steps and fog thinned gradually until Thalorica emerged once more from the mountain dark.

No footsteps followed her now. That should've helped, but her shoulders stayed tight the entire walk back.

Idonea turned onto Nellith's lane and stopped so abruptly the grave jar nearly slipped from her fingers. The front door stood open, darkness filling the narrow gap beyond it. Wrong darkness.

Nellith never left the front door open. Idonea climbed the porch steps slowly. The Current hummed faintly around the doorway.

The hinges creaked as she pushed the door inward. She knew no one would answer. Idonea shut the door behind her and lit the nearest gas lamp with shaking fingers. Yellow light spilled weakly across the foyer.

An unnatural stillness hung over the house.

Idonea stormed up the staircase, and the floorboards creaked underfoot. Her old bedroom greeted her with cobwebs and peeling wallpaper. At the window, she peered down into the street.

A boy who appeared to be in his late teens stood at the end of the gravel garden path. Nothing about him appeared daemon. He was looking directly at the front door, like a statue. The Current around him pulled too tight.

“Where are you,” she muttered.

The boy’s head jerked upwards, and his eyes drilled into her. She took a step back and closed her eyes. Line of sight mattered, a lesson learned early by every witch. The Current travelled easiest along attention. She counted to ten before peering back out the window. He was gone.

She pressed her palm against the glass. When she removed it, there was no fog from spirit residue. Marked, not possessed. There was a difference, and it mattered. She hated patterns she didn't understand.

When he didn’t reappear, Idonea knew she'd to find Nellith, and fast.

The daemon-possessed must've been the one to follow her earlier.

The sanctum air stagnated, heavy and wrong. The iron clock struck one, driving a chill deep under her skin.

She went towards Nellith’s room. On her way, she passed the door that had remained unopened for fifteen years. She ran her fingers over the wooden lettering spelling out her sister’s name: Dyota. She stood at the door a moment with her hand on the wood. She didn't open it, or put her ear to it. The smell of rosemary came under it the way it always had. By any reckoning the smell should've gone, but instead the rosemary persisted, faint but unmistakable. She stood with her palm flat against the door of her sister's room, and then she moved on.

Nellith’s bed covers lay strewn at the end of her bed, and a sooty scent permeated everything. She never opened her window.

Idonea ran her fingers along the dresser and came away with an uncharacteristic layer of dust. A glint of silver caught her eye. She snatched up the ring and ran her thumb along its rough ridges. It was Nellith’s dragon-eye ring. The pale green, slitted iris stared up at her. Nellith had worn it earlier. Idonea clamped it tight in her fist.

A bang vibrated up through the house, and her heart thumped.

“Nellith?” A few seconds passed, but there was no response.

Every instinct told her not to go downstairs. Each step was slow and careful as she worked her way down, doing her best not to cause a rattle. Halfway, she crouched and peered into the foyer; the front door stood wide open. Cold air drifted through.

Her hand clutched the ring tighter; the sharp edges dug into her palm. She stepped from the stairs towards the doorway. Current hummed all around her, indicating recent magic use. She took a breath, and spun her head towards the source, nausea twisting her insides. The remnant was strong, almost mistakable for Nellith's own.

Idonea had been practising for ten years since her fifteenth birthday, and for the last six away from her mother’s watchful eye. She dared not contaminate the area in case she destroyed the remnants of magic. If something powerful enough to breach Nellith's ward had entered the house, brute force would be useless.

Ritual first. Panic later.

She retrieved all the items required for a ritual that would give clues to what had happened. Near the front door, she placed the bowl of water. Laid at her side was Nellith’s ring, a silver needle, and a strand of black thread.

She should've felt more. That was a frightening thought, that a daughter whose mother had been dragged into the dark should've felt something more than the usual old, careful watchfulness.

Using the needle, Idonea pricked her index finger and let three drops of blood fall into the water. As ripples formed, she wrapped the thread around the ring, whispering Nellith’s name three times.

The Current gathered, smothering her, caressing her.

Idonea crashed sideways. The bowl overturned, water splashing across the floorboards. Growling, her pupils shifted back from their slitted appearance, an occurrence when she connected to the Current.

Nellith’s pet Iaculus, Lance, a flying serpent of onyx scales no longer than her forearm, curled up on the floorboards near one candle.

Idonea glared at him. "You little bastard." Her shoulder throbbed where he struck her. She slid Nellith's ring onto her thumb.

Lance recoiled instantly, flattening himself against the floorboards. An uneasy hiss slipped from him.

"If you're still here," Idonea muttered, rubbing her shoulder, "someone took her by force."

Lance never left Nellith, not willingly. He cocked his head to the side and fanned out his leathery, paper-thin wings, jutting out below his head.

“Go on,” Idonea said, pushing him to the side, “get.”

His silver tongue flickered out, and he gave a low hiss. She was sure he hated her. The feeling was mutual. Even if he was the last of the dragon line, she couldn’t warm her heart to him.

“I said get, you meddling creature.” She reached for the ritual bowl again.

Lance darted upward suddenly, his narrow head hovering inches from her face. The rasping sound in his throat stopped her cold. A warning for something outside. He shot towards the porch. Idonea swore under her breath and followed.

The night air hit sharp and freezing, then the smell reached her. Rot, wet cabbage, and spoiled meat. Daemon flesh, and it was fresh. Her stomach turned. Lance darted across the grass and coiled into a defensive knot, hissing. His yellow eyes gleamed in the darkness.

Idonea approached carefully. She knelt where he was and nudged his side, earning her another sharp hiss. He'd curled around a daemon sigil.

The sigil formed a rigid, symmetrical design: a spiked crown set atop a narrow cross, bound by a horizontal bar like a clasp. She had seen it once before in one of Nellith's books, on a page Nellith had closed quickly. Vinea, a daemon archduke. Archdukes were not meant to cross over from the Nexis. Idonea was looking at a sigil that should not have been drawn in this world.

The Current shifted violently around her. Idonea spun. Lance growled.

Darkness swallowed her vision. The daemon stench flooded her lungs. Rot. Blood. Something ancient underneath.

Light. She needed light. Idonea reached desperately for the Current.



Pain arrived first, hot, sharp and wet. Grass dug into her palms. Idonea opened her eyes slowly to find Lance hovering above her head, wings beating hard enough to scatter frost from the ground.

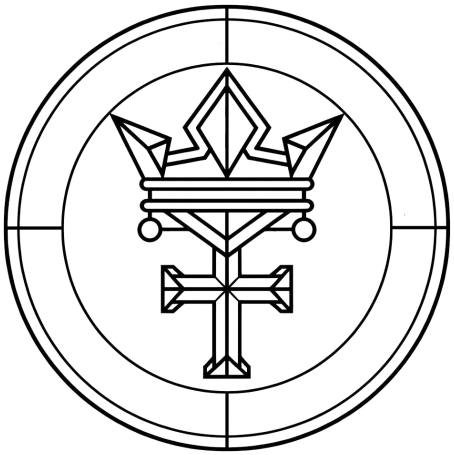
Still night. Her stomach dropped. *How long?* She shoved herself upright too quickly. The world tilted.

There was no daemon, no movement, only silence. Her hand rose to the side of her head and came away bloodied. She staggered towards the porch.

The front door stood closed now. A bloody handprint smeared across the wood. Human, and deliberate. Someone wanted her to see it. Her mouth dried instantly.

Her fists curled, nails sharpening into claws.

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Chapter 3

Lance jabbed her hard beneath the ribs. Idonea swore, curling tighter into herself on the chaise and resisting the feral urge to swat him across the sanctum. Her head throbbed as though it'd been cleaved open.

“Give me a moment.” Her voice scraped coming out.

The Iaculus ignored her suffering. Grey morning leaked through the sanctum windows.

Idonea pressed trembling fingers against her forehead and breathed shallowly through the nausea. Anything deeper made the pain behind her eyes pulse harder.

This was no rogue spirit, no stray from the Nexis that had wandered through a thin place in the veil by accident. Not random, but planned. The daemon had waited until she left, and it'd taken Nellith alive. That part mattered most.

Lance hissed sharply again.

"Yes, yes. I'm moving."

The sanctum tilted unpleasantly when she sat upright. Lance perched nearby atop the bookshelf, body twitching irritably against the wood. Idonea rubbed at her eyes and forced herself to stand.

The house creaked softly around her. The silence underneath remained worse. She stumbled downstairs towards the kitchen, one hand trailing the wall for balance. Lance trailed behind her, hoping she'd move quicker.

The stove lit on the second strike. She fixed herself a cup of black tea infused with dried nettle and powdered obsidian root; Nellith's morning recipe, the one she'd been making in this house since Idonea was a child. The smell of it filled the kitchen. Idonea drank it standing while weak daylight spread through the kitchen windows.

The tea steadied her hands. She carried the mug back upstairs and stopped in the centre of the sanctum. Lance settled onto his perch.

Nothing appeared disturbed; no overturned furniture and no blood. Nellith wouldn't vanish quietly. Unless she intended to. Idonea's eyes narrowed.

Nellith had removed her ring before disappearing. An intentional placement.

The grave dirt errand. Lance absent. The timing. It was a distraction. Nellith had known something was coming.

Of course she hadn't warned her.

She strode towards the writing desk, its surface a chaos of vellum sheets, glass vials, and leather-bound grimoires. She rummaged through the clutter. Most of the tomes were familiar, volumes she'd thumbed through during her teenage years.

Idonea froze. A book lay near the back, covered in a worn scrap of velvet. She peeled the cloth away to reveal a tome she'd never seen before. Bound in calfskin, the texture was soft yet strangely warm beneath her fingertips. Her hand jerked instinctively. Books shouldn't feel alive. The spine cracked softly when she opened it.

Age had ragged its pages and faded its ink, but some margins bore Nellith's unmistakable handwriting, notes in a tight, hurried scrawl. The core text, though, was in a tongue Idonea didn't know; the script coiled in the shape of a resting dragon, and she could sound out nothing of it.

She flipped page after page, brow furrowed. Obscure ritual references. A sketch of a tree without roots. A map of stars that didn't belong to their sky.

A margin note in Nellith's hand caught her eye: '*Five marks. Five years. The vessel must be prepared slowly.*' Idonea flipped past the page; she'd no need for any rituals.

She turned another page and immediately flipped back, her breath catching.

A detailed illustration filled the parchment: a heart-shaped relic about the size of a fist, sketched in delicate ink that caught the light in strange ways; pale where pale should not be, gold-veined where the artist had tried to render shadow. Ancient runes etched along one face of the crystal, and Idonea's heart skipped a beat; the pattern echoed the same runes tattooed along her spine.

A chill needled through her ribs as she read the translated margin notes, penned by Nellith herself.

The crystallised heart of Ffyrnedd, the Witchwyrm. Slain during the First Sundering. Hidden, not destroyed. Still, it beats beneath realms, waiting…

Ffyrnedd, a name older than language.

Even the name sat wrong in her mouth. Nellith used to forbid stories about the devourers, reality-thinning creatures. Dragons steeped so deeply in the Primal Current that the world bent around them. Children in Draugaros whispered that Ffyrnedd's death scream tore the first wound in the Nexis. Idonea used to think that part was metaphor.

Her eyes moved faster across the page. The heart survived, and not merely as a relic. As a key. Heat crawled slowly up the back of her neck.

A key capable of opening a permanent gateway in the Nexis. A key, the margin note read, that required a vessel to fit.

The words on the page swam before her eyes. The Nexis was the only thing standing between the daemon plane and theirs, its barrier keeping their horrors from slipping through every shadow. A permanent breach would swallow the world.

And Nellith had somehow become involved with the key capable of opening it.

A shard of cold fury lanced through her. “What have you done?”

If the daemons knew Nellith possessed the Heart, they would never stop hunting her. Idonea looked back at the text desperately, searching for some explanation that sounded less catastrophic. Nothing improved.

Only one thing remained clear: Nellith had hidden this deliberately.

She tore the page free before she could reconsider. The parchment resisted strangely, closer to separating wet cloth than paper. *Wonderful, cursed parchment*. Exactly what her morning required. She snapped the tome shut hard enough to rattle the desk.

“Let’s go, Lance.”

His tongue flickered once, and he shot past her.

Idonea shoved the torn page into her satchel, strapped on her coat, and tugged her goggles down over her glasses before stepping outside.

Cold ait struck sharp against her face. Morning smoke rolled through the streets in heavy layers. Factory exhaust stained the fog strange colours above the lower districts; green, bruised purple and sickly yellow. Thalorica smelled like rusted lungs in winter.

Lance circled above, his sinuous body twisting through the pale morning light. He veered northward, towards the higher tiers of Thalorica, the clifftop neighbourhoods of the wealthy, where homes were carved from the mountain’s stone.

Steam hissed from sewer grates, and workers shouted somewhere below. A factory bell rang twice. Nobody hurried towards the sound. Factory deaths happened too often to inspire urgency anymore.

She followed with her chin low, heart pounding beneath her corset, doing her best not to meet any eyes. Her presence in town was a stain on many memories. Some still remembered the incident; the boy, the bleeding shadows, the way the Current had snapped free. She’d left after that.

Lance hissed, veering towards the cliff’s edge. A knot twisted in her gut.

They wouldn’t take Nellith down there, would they? Down into the daemon plane?

Her feet stopped. Cold sweat gathered at the back of her neck. The Nexis. If Nellith had been dragged through—No.

Idonea forced her feet forward to the cliff's edge, salt stinging her lips. The sea stretched below in endless green-blue depths, water crashing white against the rocks far beneath. Here, the Current thinned to a mere whisper.

Lance dropped like a stone, disappearing beneath the lip. He returned moments later, wings beating heavily.

“She’s not here anymore, is she?” Her voice cracked, and she resented the crack. Their relationship may be strained, but Nellith was still her mother. And that mattered. She'd not lose another person and survive it politely. Especially after what her father had done to them.

Lance made a low sound she'd never heard before. Not anger, but grief. Idonea looked away first.

“Then we check the Skyport. We’ll find a way.” Idonea waved him away from the cliff.

Back in the heart of town, she stepped into the Skyport office. The stale air was heavy with pipe smoke and old sweat. Behind the counter sat a clerk with sleep-heavy eyes and an ink-stained collar.

“What can I do for you?” he asked, barely looking up.

A wooden board hung behind him, scribbled with barely legible departure times.

“When’s the next ship north?”

He glanced at the board, as if surprised to find it still there. “Evening dock. Leaves at first bell tomorrow.”

“Pirates?” she asked, fingers twitching at her sides.

He gave a dry laugh. “What else sails these skies? Republic doesn’t come here unless they’re hunting a witch.”

She dipped her head in thanks, offering a tight smile. “I’ll have coin.”

“Or something better,” he muttered, his gaze slow and appraising.

She went very still, then met his gaze. "They'll take the coin."

She turned before he could answer and stepped back out. Outside, the clouds were slate-grey, and thunder rumbled faintly behind the hills. A storm was coming.

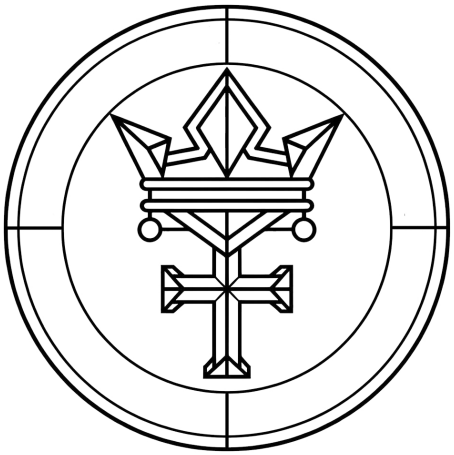
Lance swooped low, brushing her shoulder with his wing tip, forcing her to look up at him.

She clutched her satchel close.

“We’ll save her,” she said, eyes on Lance.

Her fingers curled into her palms. “I promise.”

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Chapter 4

Lance spiralled down through the canopy of smoke-streaked clouds, silent as ever, his wings slicing through the wind. For once, he didn't hiss — the first mercy of the morning.

Idonea stood before the front door of Nellith's home, her hand tightened around the satchel, its strap biting into her shoulder. Leaving the safety of Draugaros was never something she envisaged.

But standing there wouldn't bring Nellith back. It wouldn't keep the relic out of daemon hands.

The house looked smaller and emptier. The windows no longer glowed, no longer smelled of basil and black ink. Her palm pressed against the bloodied handprint stained into the wood.

She bowed her head and whispered, "I'll bleed those that took you."

Lance stayed out of sight, but never too far. His need for her tempered his eagerness, and he'd be no match against another witch or daemon. And he hid from others' gazes to protect his rarity. His wings stirred the wind above.

If there had been another way, she would've taken it. But no one sailed the oceans anymore. People culled the dragons, and the Republic built steel towers to declare the world civilised. Idonea thought both achievements were equally ugly.

The deep sea remained untamed. Beneath those black waves, horrors still stirred. The crushing pressure and Current forged horrors that lurked in waiting. No sane vessel dared the water anymore, not even to fish. And so, only the sky remained.

Idonea adjusted the goggles over her glasses as a gust tugged at her coat. The wind was rising, and storm clouds dragged low across the sky.

Back at the top of Thalorica, stretching up behind the Skyport office, lay her destination.

At the bottom of the metal stairs, she paused, trying to push down the dizziness. She took a deep breath. The climb stretched above her like a punishment, and every step clanged beneath her boots, reverberating through her skull.

She was not the only traveller. Others jostled past, impatience etched onto their features: a merchant with a crate full of canisters, a sharp-eyed woman carrying a cage filled with fluttering shadowmoths, and a boy with scorch marks on his hands, hauling a sealed trunk.

At the top, the airship loomed like a chimera. Scarred metal bands wrapped the hull tight enough to make the airship resemble a stitched wound. Pipes wound around its body like the veins of some strange beast, and the white balloon overhead strained against its ropes. The single propeller at the stern creaked, and a great canvas sail hung beneath like a fin to guide its flight.

A lone pirate leaned against a support beam near the boarding plank, arms crossed, one boot perched lazily atop the other. His ivory skin gleamed in the misty light, and a smirk played on his lips as his gaze slid over her.

“My,” he drawled, tipping his cap up. “What’s a pretty little shadow like you doing up here?”

Idonea’s throat closed. She knew what had to be done, and she’d hoped to keep her mark hidden forever. But Nellith had told her: *if you ever need passage from those who fly beneath the banner of no nation, show them who you are. They will know.*

“Ain’t got all day,” he prompted. An acrid mixture of grease and smoke surrounded him.

Her dagger was already in her hand. A single prick of her middle finger, and red blood welled. She touched it to the skin of her wrist, and the ink responded.

The vine tattoo that curled around her wrist bloomed, lotuses unfurling one by one until the dragon revealed itself, a sleeping wyrm, delicate and deadly, its form intertwined with her veins. She had the flowers added on her nineteenth birthday. Nellith disapproved, but Idonea loved it.

The pirate stood upright, every ounce of swagger fading. His throat bobbed.

“On board,” he said.

She passed him with a tilt of her lips, dragging her sleeve back down as the dragon faded. Lance hovered nearby, keeping out of sight. He wouldn’t be safe for long in the open air.

The hum of heat struck her immediately. She must be close to the boiler room. The scent of scorched oil and old rust clung to the air like mildew, and she made her way towards the centre of the deck, away from the railing, away from the open sky.

It didn’t take long for the same pirate to sidle up to her. “So,” he said, “a Riven, eh?" He glanced down at her scars. "Captain’ll want a word.”

Rivens couldn't hide. Their scars showed.

Idonea cast a glance upward, where storm clouds clawed at the sky. If they weren’t careful, they’d fly straight to their deaths. But there was no other route, and she needed to get to the Republic, even if it meant walking into the wyrm’s nest.

“I require quarters with a viewport.” She needed to smuggle Lance on board.

“But of course,” he replied.

She scanned the crowd of passengers, but saw nothing of concern.

“Are you the first mate?” she asked.

The pirate smirked. “Name’s Kerem.”

She offered a thin smile, wondering whether he'd any idea just how lethal she truly was.

Kerem led her inside the hull down two narrow staircases, past pipes that hissed with pressure. He stopped at a modest cabin door.

“You lodge here. I’ll be beside you.”

“Thank you,” she said, making a note to bar her door while she slept. “And the captain?”

He flashed a grin. His teeth were yellowing. “You’ll join Safira for supper. Keep our skies clear. No one wants a storm.”

“Of course.” Idonea knew they’d demand her abilities in payment for her voyage.

She entered her quarters and shut the door fast behind her. The bed was little more than a cot, a chipped washbasin in one corner, and a tiny viewport that let in the light.

She unlatched it, and Lance darted inside before the wind could slam it shut again. He curled under the cot to hide.

Before kneeling, she gathered a bowl, bird feather, water, piece of cloth, and black thread from her satchel. Sky Currents were thinner, easier to shape, but harder to hold. Idonea poured the water into the bowl and laid the feather and cloth across its surface to form a cross.

She cut her tongue, letting blood fall into the water, and she whispered for calm and stillness. Steam rose from the water, which she leaned over to inhale. Each breath in darkened the feather, thinning and splitting the clouds in their path.

It cost her.

She sank to the cot, shivering, head pounding. Her tongue throbbed, pulsing against the walls of her mouth. Thick blood coated her tongue, and swallowing didn't help.

Lance crept up beside her, curling tightly, and his presence eased the nausea. Her eyes dropped to Nellith’s ring on her hand. The sharp pain behind her sternum returned. Lance's head rose, his eyes staring at the ring.

The ship shuddered as the propeller roared to life. Idonea didn’t move as she watched the sky shift through the viewport, the sun vanishing behind the clouds.

Lance nudged her bag. She fished out a strip of dried pork and held it out. He sniffed and recoiled.

“Then starve.” The syllables came out thick and broken, stuck in her mouth like gravel. She went to tuck it away, but he lunged and snapped it from her fingers, his fangs grazing her skin.

She smirked. “See, not that bad.” A pulse of agony shot through her. She hoped she didn’t need to perform that ritual again during the travel.

Her eyes narrowed as she watched Lance devour the food. He had been missing when she got her tattoo done, as if sent away just like Idonea had been. How would Nellith know the exact moment she’d be taken? It sat wrong on her shoulders, but her mother always knew more than others.

She closed her eyes, hoping to find relief from both her headache and throbbing tongue.

A knock stirred her awake. Night had fallen.

“Safira will see you now,” Kerem said through the door.

As she stepped into the corridor, a rotten, burnt-cabbage scent caught her attention. Low and familiar. A daemonic trace, faint, but unmistakable.

“How long to reach the Republic?” she asked.

“A few days,” he said. “Provided weather stays clear.”

The weather was the smaller problem. She couldn’t shake the sense of wrongness as he led her towards a larger door, away from the scent. She barely smelt it anymore. He knocked once and pushed the door open.

“I’ll be outside,” he said, “so don’t try nothin’.”

Idonea would’ve liked him to try and stop her, but she smiled and entered the room. The captain’s cabin was large. A round dining table stood off to the right, with a charting table to the left. The secondary doorway must’ve led to her sleeping quarters, and she wandered over to the charting table to peruse the map laid out.

"Kerem didn't lie." The voice came in on orange and cinnamon. "You're a vision."

Idonea turned.

Sun-browned skin, with black hair in intricate loops. She wore a corset and high boots, legs bare to the thigh, a pistol at one hip and a rapier at the other.

Heat climbed abruptly into her face. Safira noticed immediately.

"Never seen so much flesh, witch?"

“Not unless I’m also naked.”

Safira laughed. “One must use every advantage.” She nodded to Idonea’s own low-cut blouse.

Idonea sat at the dining table and clasped her hands together. Safira’s eyes slid down Idonea’s body in appraisal.

“So,” Safira said. “Few wish to enter the Republic these days. If anything, they wish to leave.”

Everyone feared the Republic. The Republic feared the Temple: a zealous, old power with divine mandate and cultural sway. Recognised as a religious authority with the right to operate its own justice system concerning witchcraft and daemonic activity.

“I must find my mother.” She omitted the relic. No one else needed that information.

Safira raised an eyebrow. “A bit old to need your mother, no?”

Idonea cleared her throat. “A daemon took her.” Her mind strayed to the faint trace she sensed outside, how familiar it was to the daemonic.

“Well,” Safira said, tipping her head to one side, “that is something one does not hear often. Though, there have been whispers.”

One of the crew members walked into her cabin with two plates: chicken fricassee served with jasmine rice. The scent made Idonea’s mouth

water. He also set down two wine goblets and a corked bottle of red. Without a word, or thanks from Safira, he left.

“Whispers?” Idonea asked.

Safira shrugged. “Current fluctuations, an increase in Nexis activity. And now you say you hunt a daemon.”

Idonea’s brows furrowed. It had to be connected. The daemons were aware of the relic, and they were stirring.

“What kind of Nexis activity?” she asked. The more she knew, the better she’d be prepared.

Safira uncorked the bottle and poured generous amounts into both glasses. She pushed one towards Idonea.

“Sightings of lesser nobles,” Safira said, “Thralls and Shades gathering near Nexis veils.”

Idonea took a shaky breath. More daemons meant less room to move, and less room meant mistakes. Mistakes got people killed.

She eyed the goblet and after Safira took a sip, she picked up the glass and pressed it to her lips. A fruity fragrance of dark berries and forest herbs greeted her nose. She took a tentative sip and let the wine run over her tongue. It had notes of black pepper. Even after she swallowed, a pleasant aftertaste lingered.

“Well?” Safira prompted, her eyebrows raised.

Idonea took another sip, savouring the taste. “It is pleasing. Thank you.” She was used to the Sunfire Amber that was common in Draugaros, with its ripe apricot and honey flavour.

“See,” she said, “isn’t bad. They call it Dawnfire Red.”

“Your first mate—”

“Kerem.”

“Yes, your first mate, Kerem, said we’d arrive within a few days,” Idonea said.

Safira propped her elbows up on the table and rested her chin on her folded hands. “Yes, the Bogomir Republic is unkind to witches. Especially Rivens.”

“I have no intention of handing you over for smuggling me in.” Idonea took another sip of wine.

Safira pushed her chair away and stood, sauntering over. “Of course you wouldn’t. But you’ll go in under the guise as an engineer. The Republic Octopi and those Templars never give such workers a second glance.”

Safira refilled Idonea's glass. "You know what the Republic actually runs on? Roots. Old, black, poisonous roots that grow in places nothing else will. They call the harvest Eitr. The Templars say it's blood from the dragons, that the roots grew from where the wyrms bled into the earth at the Sundering. Whether that's true or just temple poetry, I couldn't tell you. But the substance is real, and the Republic can't function without it."

"Every shackle uses it. Wards too." Safira drank. "Templar weapons. Republic engines. Half the damn country runs on Eitr." Her smile thinned. "And the roots don't like ordinary people touching them."

Idonea knew of Eitr, poisonous venom roots. Nellith had spoken of wyrm blood hardening into roots through the earth, but it was the first time she'd heard it being used, or grown.

Up close, Idonea spied the brass pin upon Safira’s blouse, her pirate clan mark. A circular cog enclosed a skeletal crow with a clock for one of its eye sockets. Even those in Draugaros knew that symbol, the Clockwork Crows. Stories of how they’d crushed pirates who ferried slaves, sending many airships tumbling into the waters below.

Safira’s slender finger slid under Idonea’s chin, forcing her eyes up to meet hers.

“Lesson one. Walk as if nothing bothers you.” She gestured back to the table. “You should eat before it chills.”

Idonea’s fingers curled into her palms. Her physicality had no bearing on the power that shimmered underneath her flesh. Others had underestimated her before.

Safira watched Idonea eat, but they stayed in silence.

“Head back to your cabin,” Safira said, as Idonea took a large gulp of the wine. “Kerem will fetch you tomorrow. Then we’ll start.”

Idonea laid her napkin next to the plate. “Thank you.”

Safira smiled. “Don’t thank me yet.”

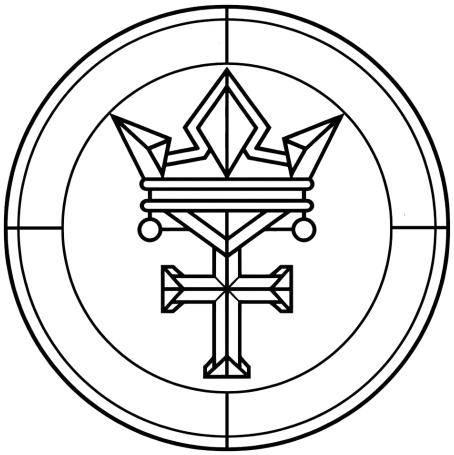
As she left, the daemonic scent was gone, but the unease lingered. Kerem waited with a smug grin.

Back in her cabin, shadows curled around her. Lance watched her from the cot. Idonea suspected he disliked uncertainty almost as much as she did.

“I know,” she said, voice soft.

The scent was gone. That frightened her more. Daemons rarely stopped hunting voluntarily.

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Chapter 5

By morning, the storm had passed, leaving a thin sheen of silver over the deck rails. The Current buzzed faintly in Idonea's blood, a side effect of her earlier manipulation. But she'd no time to rest.

Safira insisted she required a change of clothes, primarily to hide the scarring upon Idonea's flesh. The captain's voice carried from behind a silk screen.

"If you're to walk the Republic streets, you'll do it as someone the Republic adores."

Idonea stood in the centre of the captain's quarters, swaddled in lace and discomfort. A high-collared white blouse hugged her throat; a yellow brocade vest cinched her waist too tightly. The matching skirt, with its layers of fabric, whispered against her legs.

Safira emerged, fastening the last button on her sleeve. She tilted her head, narrowed eyes raking over Idonea. "Well?"

Idonea smoothed the front of the skirt, biting back a grimace. "I thought I was to be an engineer?"

Safira gave her a deliberate smile. "You are. An engineer who has arrived on a pirate ship."

She circled once, fingertips gracing the air near Idonea's shoulder, close enough to make her skin prickle.

"Almost perfect. You'll need proper boots and a mask before we dock, though. Those?" She pointed at Idonea's old boots. "They scream, 'Witch in exile'."

Idonea didn't dignify that with a response.

Safira vanished into her private quarters. She returned with a pair of black leather boots. Mid-calf height, copper-plated heels that caught the lantern light, and more buckles than were strictly necessary. Idonea sat, tugged them on, and adjusted the copper fixtures with reluctant

appreciation. They were well made, practical even. She moved the bone shard to the new boots.

Safira's gaze softened. "There. You look like one of *mine*."

They exited the captain's quarters, Safira leading the way with a confident swagger. The crew straightened instinctively as she passed. Kerem, halfway through a conversation, stopped and stared. He blinked twice.

"Find her a mask," Safira said without slowing.

Kerem nodded, still staring as Safira's grin flickered.

Idonea smiled with deliberate calm. "Do you often gawk at your captain's guests, or only the dangerous ones?"

The colour drained from his face, just as she'd hoped.

Safira's chuckle floated between them. "She learns quickly."

As they ascended the metal stairs to the main deck, wind slapped at Idonea's cheeks and tangled her curls. It was wild, cold and sharp, and she welcomed it. The weight lifted; wind and sky, the scent of salt, a hint of smoke.

When she opened her eyes, Safira stood near the railing, her coat flaring behind her like wings. Idonea joined her but didn't step too close to the edge. The drop unnerved her more than she cared to admit.

Crewmen crawled across the rigging with the ease of people too accustomed to falling, adjusting sails and oiling the gearwork. A boy no older than fifteen polished brass fittings until they gleamed, while an older woman barked at him to keep pace. The smell of pitch, metal, and salted pork drifted from somewhere aft. The balloon above strained at its ropes.

"Lesson two," Safira said, her gaze still fixed on the horizon. "Always act like the sky belongs to you. Because if you look like prey, you'll become prey."

Idonea tightened her grip on the railing. She thought of the Current, of the daemon's scent that haunted her the night before, clinging to the shadows of her cabin. Even now, with the wind fresh, she swore she caught a trace of it; pungent, like something rotting out of sight.

Her chest tightened, forcing her gaze towards the endless stretch of clouds as the pale sun broke through. She let herself believe she could be free here, but the unease lingered, curling inside her like smoke.

Safira's hand lightly brushed hers on the railing. "Don't flinch," she murmured. "Skyfolk watch for weakness."

Idonea swallowed and nodded, forcing her spine straight.

For the rest of the morning, she followed Safira’s commands.

"Shoulders back," Safira said. Idonea adjusted automatically. "Too rigid." *Annoying woman*.

Safira stepped beside her. "People smell fear before blood."

The deck rolled beneath them. Idonea loosened her stance slightly. Crewmen looked and Idonea let them. Smirks faded quickest when she held eye contact half a second too long. Approval curled briefly at the edge of Safira's smile.

And through it all, the ship surged forward, sails creaking and brass engines humming deep below deck.

Safira turned to her with a soft smile. “What’s your plan once we reach the Republic?”

“Find my mother. Find the daemon,” Idonea said.

“Bold plan. And when you find this daemon? Kill it?”

Idonea didn’t answer immediately. She wanted to say yes. That she could tear the thing’s heart out and cast it into fire. But the truth sat like lead behind her teeth.

Safira turned. “Just take care.”

Idonea studied her. “Why help me at all? You know what I am. What I can do.”

Safira’s expression softened, just a fraction. “Everyone deserves a shot at freedom. But the world fears anything it failed to control. I prefer to collect useful things before the world breaks them.”

Idonea let the answer sit between them. Useful things. The phrase settled badly beneath her ribs. Too close to how Nellith spoke sometimes.

Across the deck most passengers kept to themselves, huddled in cloaks or muttering. But one woman stood utterly still — too still.

Her chest didn’t rise, and her shoulders didn’t twitch in the wind. It was the stillness of death, or something imitating the living.

A cold tingle slid down Idonea’s spine. She narrowed her eyes, turned away to prick a finger on her knife, and tugged at a strand of the Current. They were wispy, half-invisible, like smoke trails from a dying flame. She tested the Current around the woman.

Current recoiled and pushed away from her presence.

“Who is that?” Idonea asked and pointed towards the woman.

Safira followed her gaze and shrugged. “Some upper-class passenger. Paid well to get to the capital in one piece.”

Idonea didn’t respond. She couldn’t afford to. If she accused the woman and was wrong, or worse, if the captain sold that information, she’d lose any advantage.

Safira didn’t let her rest long. Once Idonea had circled the deck twice with her chin tilted just so, the captain snapped her fingers and tossed her a hand crossbow.

“Lesson three,” Safira said. “No one who works rough walks unarmed. Show me how you hold it.”

Idonea caught the weapon with clumsy fingers, knuckles white, stance tight as a drawn string. Safira clicked her tongue, and stepped closer, correcting the angle of Idonea’s wrist with a fingertip that lingered longer than necessary.

“Relax your fingers,” Safira said. “Let the weight tell you where to be.”

Like heat at her back, the captain’s presence anchored Idonea even as it set her on edge.

Safira nodded towards Idonea’s stiletto at her hip. “Can you wield it like a weapon?”

“I have,” she replied, clipping the crossbow on her belt and unsheathing the dagger.

Safira adjusted her grip. “Don't clench the blade. Coax it. It moves with you.”

Idonea’s cheeks burned.

They practised in the open stretch of deck, under the watchful eyes of passing crew. A wiry man laughed when Idonea stumbled, earning him a sharp bark from Safira. “She’ll cut you open by nightfall if you mock her.” That silenced him.

Safira demonstrated with effortless grace, her coat flaring with each motion. Idonea copied her, slowly, but there was strength behind her blows. Each clang of steel echoed through the air like a challenge.

Between drills, her attention snagged on a group of pirates lashing down a long crate near the stern. The lid had shifted in the wind, and through the gap she saw the gleam of polished brass; jointed rods, articulated fingers, the unmistakable geometry of a mechanical arm. Another crate beside it bore the faint sun-emblem of the Temple of Radiant

Dawn stamped beneath a hasty coat of black paint. Someone hadn't been thorough enough.

Kerem caught her looking. He kicked the lid shut without breaking stride. "Salvage," he said. "Republic surgeons leave things behind when they run."

"Or when they're pushed," she replied.

His grin was answer enough.

“Lesson four, speak less, listen more. Men can’t resist filling silence with their own noise. Let them talk, and you’ll learn every secret.”

A crewman passed a dented flask down the rigging line, and it reached Safira before Idonea understood it was coming to her. The captain accepted it, turned it once in her fingers, and passed it on without drinking. Only then did she nod for Idonea to take her own pull from the water skin at her hip.

"Lesson five. Never drink first." Safira watched the flask travel on. "Wait. See what a thing does to the man beside you before you let it into your own blood."

"You think your own crew would poison you?"

"I think a captain who assumes otherwise doesn't stay a captain." She said it lightly.

They ran the drills again after that, until Idonea's shoulder ached and the wiry man who'd laughed earlier had found somewhere else to be. When Kerem drifted back within earshot, still trailing his story, Safira glanced at Idonea and tipped her chin toward him.

“Lesson six," Safira said. "Smile when you want someone nervous."

Idonea raised a brow. "Does that work?"

Safira's grin widened. Kerem immediately stopped talking. *Useful*.

By the time sweat dampened Idonea’s curls and her arms ached, a new stability took root inside her. The pirate’s gait settled into her bones.

Safira leaned closer. Heat brushed the shell of Idonea's ear. "Lesson seven," Safira murmured. Idonea kept her expression still through force alone. "Never forget the mask. Even if the world knows you’re afraid, you must never let them see it.”

Idonea exhaled slowly, eyes scanning the endless sprawl of clouds around them.

Kerem appeared then, all swagger and smirk. “Captain, the mask’s in your cabin.”

His eyes drifted towards Idonea, lingering too long.

Idonea wanted to bare her teeth. Instead, she smiled slightly. The effect unsettled him more.

Safira whispered, “Well done.”

“Looks like one of ours, doesn’t she?” Safira asked him.

Kerem tipped his cap. “Would fool any Octopi.”

Idonea didn’t fear the Republic’s military, because any whiff of witchcraft would summon down a Templar.

“Good,” Safira said briskly. “Now get back to work.”

Safira held Kerem's stare until he looked away, and slipped away.

Through the passageways, past groaning pipes and flaring lanterns Idonea followed the captain. Back in the cabin, Safira tossed her a black leather mask which would cover the mouth, with fine silver mesh stitched into its breathers.

“Wear it in the capital.”

Idonea turned it over in her hands. “Why? I’ll suffocate in this.”

“It’s for your safety. The capital air’s thick with toxins. Too many manufactories. The Republic fears plague more than witches. Only Templars walk barefaced in the capital.”

Apparently, divine authority protected lungs as well as souls. Safira bid her farewell, leaving Idonea to enter the narrow passages alone. At her cabin door, Idonea stopped.

The Current thrummed, recoiling from down the way. Daemon essence.

Current swirled like ash behind her eyes, barely perceptible. Like smoke through cracks in a floorboard. The hallway was silent, not even footsteps sounded. Just a breathless tension, as if the ship held its breath.

She took a deep breath, took her glasses off, forced her pupils to slit, and slid into full Current Sight.

The world blurred and shifted, edges glowing silver, and the air thickening with phantoms. The daemonic trail shimmered, pulsing erratically, disappearing down the hall.

Idonea followed it, step by step, fingertips brushing the ridges in the wood. The pulse strengthened as her temples throbbed. The trail led to a door, sealed tight.

Her breath hitched. The stench of daemon was overwhelming; thick as rot in summer heat.

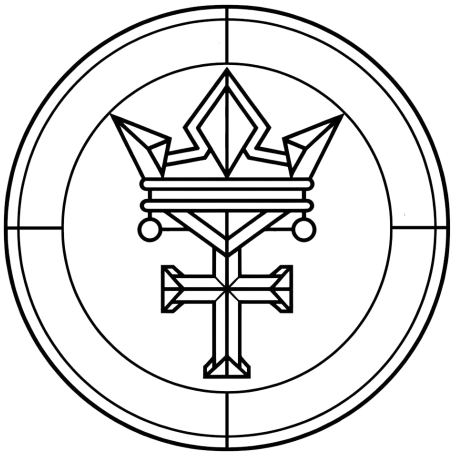
She released her grip on the Current before it ripped too much from her. Her eyes watered hard as she released the Current. Reality snapped

painfully back into shape as she fit her glasses back on, and with it came the silence again. No sound from within, and no light beneath the door.

She pressed her palm to the wood. It was cool with no vibration, and no presence she could sense.

Two breaths. Then she shoved the door open, braced for violence.

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Chapter 6

Bile rose. She gagged, and kept gagging after there was nothing left to bring up.

The boy who'd stood outside Nellith's house now lay crumpled on the floor. His chest opened up by five strokes, jagged wounds, the cuts crossing one another at angles. Where his throat should've been was a gap, and nothing else.

Books had described these wounds. The throat opened, the chest carved in five strokes. A daemon's killing. Specifically, an archduke's killing — a signature, the way some artists signed their work. The boy had failed to keep her in sight, and Vinea had collected him for the failure.

She couldn't even feel her heartbeat. The boy's spirit lingered, trapped in the void left behind.

Tears burned her eyes as she knelt beside his ruined body. All his skin was a greenish-blue colour, and rotting flesh and daemon stench mixed in the air.

Her hands trembled as she reached out, fingers brushing the boy's cold, clammy skin. His spirit needed release, needed to be freed from the confines of a decaying vessel. She whispered the incantation, her voice a soft murmur.

"Lament him, Current. Let his spirit be free from the confines of a bodily prison. Let the winds mourn and carry the tears to rain. He is unburdened. Let him be swept free."

The door slammed behind her. She jumped and spun around, but there was no one. Her mouth dried, and her heartbeat hammered in her ears.

A bloody handprint marred the door from the inside. Her skin prickled. *If the daemon followed her here, then Nellith might still be alive*. The thought hit hard enough to hurt. Guilt followed immediately. *What if she'd led it here instead?*

Her thoughts clawed at her as every possibility played out in harsh clarity. Idonea shook her head, trying to pull away from the spiralling panic. She needed a plan, not despair. But even as she forced herself to breathe, the handprint thrummed in her mind, a silent accusation. Her fingers itched towards her dagger.

Safira had a right to know a daemon roamed her ship. There was no question about it now.

Inside the captain's cabin, Safira sat at the dining table, nonchalant as Idonea recounted the events. The captain's demeanour was unfazed, as if a daemon was a mere inconvenience.

"It is but one more day and we reach the capital." Her tone was flat, bored. "Then the daemon will leave this ship, and it is my problem no more."

Idonea's pulse quickened, her frustration bubbling to the surface. "You'd not care if it killed again?" She paced back and forth, adrenaline coursing through her veins.

Safira barely looked up. The faint curl of a smile teased at the corner of her lips.

"I've no need to fret, doll." She stood, moving towards the window. "I've got a witch on board."

Idonea froze, a mix of relief and indignation warring inside her. Her gaze flicked to Safira, poised at the window, calm and impossibly composed.

Her pulse slowed, eyes narrowing with purpose. The ship groaned beneath her feet. Flushing out the daemon would be dangerous, not just to her, but to every passenger. Idonea had to hope that Safira was right in her faith, that the daemon wouldn't strike, not on the ship.

Sleep eluded her that night. Every creak of the ship, every whisper of the wind, set her on edge. Even Lance was restless. They still weren't comfortable with each other, but his hissing had lessened.

The sun had climbed high enough to bleach the deck in pale gold when Idonea walked alongside Safira and Kerem. The wind tugged at her cloak, carrying the smell of salt and oiled metal across the deck.

Safira leaned casually against the rail, one boot perched on the edge. Her eyes scanned the horizon.

"We'll reach the capital tonight. Once we dock, we part our ways, doll."

Idonea’s lips tightened. She wanted to ask for more. Instead, irritation slipped out.

“You’ve never asked my name,” Idonea said.

Safira tilted her head, a slow smile brushing her lips. “And I don’t wish to hear it.”

“I wish there was a better way to repay you.” Gratitude settled uncomfortably inside her. Too close to dependence.

Safira turned towards the railing, letting her fingers trace the cool metal. Her smile softened, but her eyes remained sharp.

“Safe passage is its own reward. I’ve got gold, and jewels enough. And neither of those would serve you half as well as keeping you alive.”

Idonea forced a smile. She didn’t argue. There was no space for moral high ground. She watched the captain’s silhouette against the horizon.

“Is there anything else?”

Kerem shook his head. “You'd better get yourself ready.”

Later, in the privacy of her cabin, she cracked open the viewport and let Lance slither free. His wings flared as he vanished into the gloom. He’d find her again once she reached the streets below.

Kerem knocked not long after, eyes unreadable. “Time.”

The deck was slick with dew. The capital spread beneath them through steam and fog; too large, too many places to disappear. Idonea’s stomach twisted as her mask and goggles clicked into place.

Safira gave her one final look over. “You look the part.” She glanced at the sky, where the moon tried, and failed, to burn through the clouds. “Take this.” A tiny clockwork bee, warm from her palm, was pressed into Idonea’s hand. Its wings twitched faintly. “Keep it close. If you activate him, I’ll come.”

Idonea’s fingers closed around it. “You’re not tracking me?”

“Only if you ask me to.” Safira’s voice quietened. “If you make it through this, you’re worth watching.”

Then she let out a chuckle. "There is another reason." She looked towards the bee. "A man called Marcin. Grand Templar. Two years ago, he boarded a pirate vessel in the Zorya passage, accused the crew of daemon-smuggling, and hanged eleven people from their own rigging." She let out a sigh. "They were not daemon-smugglers. They were carrying refugees. Witches, mostly. Women who'd paid for passage out."

Idonea said nothing.

"I have been waiting for an occasion to repay the debt," Safira said. "If you should ever find yourself in the same town as Brother Marcin and find yourself in need of an airship," she spread her hands, "send the bee."

The lift groaned as it lowered her into the guts of the capital, its mechanical arms juddering and hissing. The tang of burnt oil mixed with the faint mist swirling through the lift.

Each clunk of the lift echoed like a heartbeat. No turning back. The island was behind her and urgency snaked inside her chest. She ran possibilities through her head even as the lift shuddered. In the near distance, she spotted Lance watching from the shadows.

A daemon may be following…

Every lesson Safira drilled into her echoed faintly in her mind. Fear was a luxury she couldn't afford.

The air thickened as the lift descended. Current lay heavier here, denser and chaotic. Her skin pebbled, lungs constricting. The city pressed in on her spirit like a weight and she drew a slow, sharp breath. She made the list in her head again: relic, mother, daemon. Same order as yesterday. Same order as the day before.

Halfway down, she glanced back up, making out silhouettes working on the ship’s deck. They wouldn’t leave until the next night.

The lift clanked to a halt. Dim yellow light from the gas lamps lit the cobbled street as thick mist settled in the air from the overabundance of steam. The street smelled of piss and wet coal and old fire. She breathed through her mouth.

She took two steps and stopped. Something… off. Cabbage, yes. But something beneath it. Rot. Familiar.

The daemon? Again? How could it follow so quick?

A nearby tavern door beckoned, though everything in her rebelled at entering. Still, rest was necessary. Vulnerability would kill her faster than any daemon, and Current clung to her skin like a fever.

Gas lamps sent soft light over the insides, and the hickory smoke of fire wafted through the air, mingling with ale-soaked wood. A few heads swivelled in her direction as the door swung shut. Idonea let the silence settle half a second before moving further inside. Long enough to suggest confidence. Safira would approve. Most eyes slid away afterwards.

She crossed the tavern slowly, forcing herself not to hurry. Safira had drilled that lesson into her hard enough to bruise, so Idonea let her stride

loosen slightly instead. The barkeep eyed her, gauging her mask, her weapons, but his shoulders relaxed by degrees.

“You came in with the Crows?” The barkeep acknowledged her presence as she took a free stool.

“You could say that.”

He nodded.

“You want a room?” He licked his cracked lips and wiped a handkerchief across his brow.

“Will that be a problem?” She resisted the urge to cross her arms, instead leaned lightly against the bar to pretend comfort.

He blinked once. “No. Of course not. One’ll be ready shortly.”

“You have my thanks.” Idonea propped herself on a nearby barstool.

“A drink while you wait?” he asked.

“Red, please.”

He bobbed his head, wiping a glass clean with a piece of cloth Idonea dared not look too closely at. From a bottom cabinet, he grabbed a bottle and poured a glass.

The barkeep handed it over, eyes wary. “On the house.”

Idonea smiled, took a sip, and gave a nod to let him know it was acceptable. He breathed a little sigh and moved on to another customer. Idonea watched the room without looking like she was watching the room. The dice game in the corner had four players and a fifth man standing behind one of them, drinking. The fifth man hadn't put money down. The barkeep's right hand stayed under the counter while his left poured. The door behind her had no bar.

Tentatively, she tested the Current around her and the absence of daemonic residue reassured her.

At the far end of the bar, two men spoke in low, urgent voices. She caught fragments: *mirror room, glass to the eyes, confession by morning.* One of them crossed himself in the manner of a man who hadn't done so since childhood.

"The Templars again?" the barkeep asked, not looking at them as he wiped the counter.

"Third this month," one of the men muttered. "They took a tinker's wife. Said she'd been hiding Riven kin. They put her in the mirror room and had a name out of her before the candle burned down an inch."

The barkeep set a glass down harder than he meant to.

"Hierophant's pet Resonants. They pull answers out of you like thread," the barkeep muttered.

One of the gamblers crossed himself. Idonea said nothing. She filed it away beside the other things she was not yet ready to look at directly.

A body settled beside her, brass glinting in her periphery. A pin: skull, wrench for an eye, keyhole mouth. Another pirate.

“Heard you came in on Safira’s ship,” he rasped, stinking of smoke and something fouler. Men like him mistook silence for invitation.

She didn’t turn. “And?”

“I think you’re fine.”

Her hand fell to her dagger.

The barkeep returned. “Your room is ready.”

Idonea stood and smiled. “Thank you.”

As she walked past the pirate, his hand closed around her wrist. Loose grip, and alcohol breath. Slow reflexes. He wasn't dangerous, but irritating.

“I could be company tonight,” he said.

Idonea looked him over, letting the silence stretch first. Then she smiled slightly. “You aim above your reach.” She hadn’t shared a bed since Jovana’s last breath, and this man didn’t deserve her memory.

“Suit yourself.” He spat near her boots.

She didn’t flinch, but she remembered. Just in case.

“Trouble there?” the barkeep asked.

Idonea cleared her throat. “No. My room, please.” She glanced back at the pirate and hoped he wouldn’t follow later. She didn’t need that hassle.

The barkeep nodded and led her up the creaky wooden staircase to the second floor. The lamps had blackened the walls and ceilings. Although quaint, the room was serviceable. She said her thanks and set one gold claw into his palm as payment. He looked down at it in surprise and mumbled his thanks before backing away.

Idonea went to the window and opened it, letting Lance fly in. She threw him more dried pork, and he ate it without balking. Behind a privacy screen stood a bathtub and washstand. Like back at home, the water was heated through a copper conductor while the steam pump fed water up into the bath. A luxury she didn’t expect to find.

Lance curled up on the bed, flicking his tongue out once, as if daring Idonea to move him.

Though sleep beckoned, Idonea was uneasy with the idea. She rested the jug of water in front of the door. Her hand rested near her dagger, ready to prick a finger if needed. Bloodletting was the easiest way to access the Current for a Riven.

She dozed. Then the door creaked.

Steel sang against flesh as she sliced her thumb open. Current roared through her veins. Her pupils slit, and her nails blackened and elongated.

The jug crashed to the ground as the door swung inwards. The pirate staggered in, scent of booze wafting in with him. Lance hissed, uncoiling from the bed.

Idonea drew her blade across the inside of her wrist.

“What the—” the pirate’s voice was cut off.

Idonea’s hand clamped over his throat, sharpened nails puncturing his flesh, her blood weeping over him.

“You shouldn’t have come,” she said. He’d seen Lance, so he couldn’t live. It was simple. She might not like the beast, but he was hers to protect.

Idonea whispered a word of stillness. His hands grabbed hers, trying to pry away her fingers.

She squeezed tighter. Both of their pulses aligned, Idonea sensing the pirate’s own heartbeat right next to hers.

Lance hovered nearby, but she held her other hand up to halt any action from him. Idonea took a deep breath, halting her own heart.

She pulled his limp body further into the room, kicking the door behind her. Her heart missed several beats as she did.

His fingers slackened and fell away from hers; his heartbeat didn't resume. Idonea let his body fall to the floor with a thump.

Dizziness swarmed her vision, and she staggered to the right. For one ugly second, it didn't restart. Cold flooded her limbs. Then the rhythm slammed painfully back into place. She swallowed and closed her eyes, hoping to stabilise herself.

“What a mess,” she muttered, opening her eyes and prodding his body with the toe of her boot. His heart didn't resume like hers did. The body looked smaller now. Idonea hated that part. She pressed her hand harder against the bleeding wrist.

She pulled out one of the many cloths in her satchel and hastily wrapped it around her wrist.

Kneeling at the body’s side, Idonea frowned at the puncture marks in his neck. She didn't know if he'd friends downstairs waiting for him, or if he'd his own room. She’d put his spirit to rest, just like the boy on the airship.

Her eyes snapped to Lance, who'd one eye opened, peering at her with mild interest.

“Lance?” she said. “You’re helping.”

He didn’t move.

She cocked her head. “No?”

Idonea had no idea how Nellith had controlled the beast, but there had to be a way. Her eyes caught on Nellith’s dragon eye ring.

“Guess you won’t mind me doing this—” She reached for the ring.

Lance hissed, low and offended. She smirked. Idonea suspected a connection between Lance and Nellith’s ring. His reaction confirmed it.

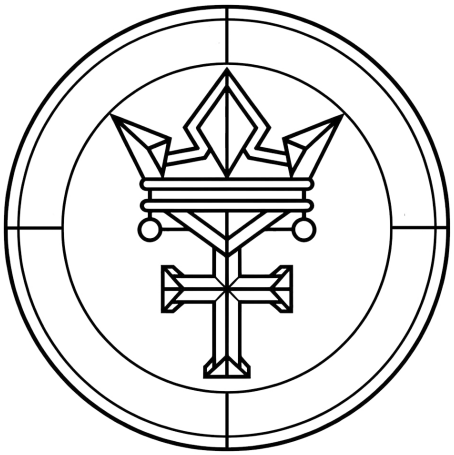
“Thought so.”

She pulled the sheet off the bed, wrapping it around the body. Though Lance was small, his strength far exceeded what anyone believed possible. Lance flew up and grabbed the end with the pirate’s feet with his mouth and hauled it out the window.

At the soft thud of his return, Idonea finally let herself lie down, the dagger resting near her hand.

Lance curled beside her. She rested a hand on his scaled side. The warmth surprised her.

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Chapter 7

Idonea slipped from the tavern into the poisoned air. The chill air wrapped around her, providing little comfort.

Overhead, the Skyport loomed through a gauze of fumes, a skeletal sprawl of iron and rigging suspended above the city. And there, still anchored amidst the rusted platforms, was the Clockwork Crows' ship.

Beyond the ship, the mountains towered. Jagged, they rose from the earth, their peaks grasping at the grey sky. The city lay hemmed in on either side by the mountains. She needed to reach the outskirts. If she waited too long, Nellith's trail, and the daemon's, would likely vanish.

The streets ahead sprawled, a disjointed patchwork of decay. Buildings leaned into one another, wooden beams rotting where brick had given up decades before. Soot clung to every surface, coating windows, doors, even the people.

Copper pipes twisted up the walls in serpentine coils. Steam hissed and belched from crooked stacks with the stink of chemicals and oil hanging thick in the air. Street sweepers moved like phantoms and still failed to keep the filth at bay. Their own uniforms were caked in grime.

As Idonea pressed deeper towards the city's heart, the streets congested with life. Steam-powered Hennepin Crawlers chugged and lurched through the middle, their spindly frames forcing horse-drawn carriages aside.

Every nerve buzzed beneath her skin. She didn't wish to be this close to everyone else.

Two figures stood still, looming among the crowds, parting the surrounding citizens without even moving. They wore full face masks of stitched charcoal hide, unadorned ushankas of black fur, and long trenchcoats clasped with brass buckles. Their right arms gleamed with an intricate plating of polished brass and steel. A golden octopus brooch gleamed on their breast. Octopi, enforcers of the Republic's will.

She gritted her teeth. They'd have no cause to single her out in the crowd.

Her gaze slid to the shadows beneath the buildings. Women, barely more than bone and skin, slumped against walls, their eyes hollow. Rags clung to them, and cuffs of blue-black metal encircled their wrists and throats. The cuffs were thin, delicate, like jewellery. But there was no mistaking what they truly were.

Witches. A sick twist rose in her stomach.

They didn't speak, didn't beg. Didn't move. Others moved around them as though they didn't exist.

One couldn't have been older than sixteen. Idonea looked away too quickly. Sympathy attracted attention. So did recognition.

She passed a pipe-junction where the brass casing had been patched with what looked like coarse grey putty. The pipe hissed faintly where the third patch failed to meet the second. Clearly no one repaired anything properly, layering new damage over old and hoping the pressure held.

The market hub was ahead, a great hexagonal sprawl of trade and noise. Steam engines rattled hard enough to vibrate through the cobblestones beneath her boots. Someone shouted nearby, and another voice screamed prices over it. Too many people, too many smells, and too many eyes. Alleys branched off from the hub like veins.

Idonea slipped through the crowd, her senses prickling. High above, Lance perched on a crumbling rooftop, his wings folded tight, eyes trained on the street below.

Somewhere nearby, a bell chimed. Soft, melodic, and out-of-place amid the market's chaos. Her head turned of its own accord.

At the far edge of the hub, half-hidden between a gearsmith's stall and a soup vendor's cart, stood a narrow booth draped in faded indigo cloth. Above it, a hand-painted sign swung lazily: "**Protection for the Faithful**."

Behind the counter sat an old woman, hunched beneath a wool shawl the colour of ash. Her hair was the dull silver of beaten tin, and a thin scarf covered her eyes. Despite her blindness, her hands moved with startling precision as she arranged rows of pendants on a velvet board. Each charm was wrought from fine copper filigree, catching the light in soft amber hues. The air around the stall smelled faintly of lavender and burnt sugar.

"Child," the woman said as Idonea neared, her voice rasped thin as paper. "You've the sound of weary feet. Take a blessing, won't you? They

keep the sickness at bay. And darker things besides."

Idonea hesitated, her fingers brushing unconsciously at Nellith's ring. "I'm only passing through," she said, forcing her tone to stay light.

The woman smiled faintly. Her empty gaze turned towards Idonea as if she saw her just fine. "The Templars sanctified these themselves," she said. "They shine when truth is near, and dim when corruption lingers."

She plucked one from the row and held it out. The charm pulsed faintly, a rhythm too low, like a heartbeat.

The pulse met her own, and the hairs on Idonea's neck rose. A subtle Current stirred in the air. The charm was drawing on it — searching. Her pulse quickened.

Another woman beside her leaned in eagerly. The old woman pressed a pendant into her hand, and its light stayed calm, steady.

But when Idonea took half a step closer, the faint copper glow flickered.

The blind woman's smile faltered, her head tilting. "Strange," she whispered. "It's seldom wrong."

Beneath the stall's counter, Idonea glimpsed slender copper wires feeding into a bronze disc. Recognition hit hard. *Witch-trap*. Her pulse stuttered.

She stepped back at once, feigning disinterest as she turned away. "Another time," she murmured.

Behind her, a sound split the air. An alarm, high-pitched, piercing.

Above, Lance shrieked.

Idonea clutched her ears as the wail tore through her skull, reverberating in her teeth. The crowd scattered.

Lance's hiss was sharp and furious. He punched right through the lady, just below the right shoulder. Lance glided on and upwards, a trail of gore following him.

Consarn!

Specks of blood spattered on her arms, face, and white clothes. The lady slumped forward into the stall. A scream echoed around as blood dripped down from her body. Idonea's heartbeat raced and her ears tuned into every surrounding sound.

Heavy footsteps echoed off the cobblestones. She spun, breath ragged, trying to locate the direction through the shifting blur of bodies and smoke.

Lance circled above her, his scales flecked with crimson. Her heart thudded; her skin became clammy.

A shrill, tearing cry from Lance spurred her into motion. Idonea bolted, boots scraping against the stone as she darted from the stall, pushing past fleeing citizens and upturned carts, away from the corpse, the alarm.

She skidded to a halt.

A wall of Octopi emerged ahead like a tide of ink. Their faces remained hidden behind stitched leather and brass. Her momentum nearly carried her into them.

She turned sharply. Another alley blocked. Another. Another. The market suddenly too narrow to breathe in.

An embroidered patch on the unplated arm gave away their Arm designation. Arm of Flame, direct assault infantry. But they were only there to corral her.

Three Templars emerged in a perfect triangle, their formation purposeful.

Lance let out a low, furious hiss and shot upward, vanishing into the choking clouds above. Out of reach, and out of sight.

The Templars were worse than the Octopi. Sun-gold tabards over ivory armour. Burnt orange shoulder cloaks, and heavy maces swinging at their belts.

She swallowed — going up against the force amassed before her would be suicide. Catching one drunk man unaware was easy. Escaping from three Templars and a wall of Octopi? Not likely.

One stepped forward, his boots echoing. His tabard stood stark against the white beneath, embroidered with the golden sunburst of the Radiant Dawn. A pentocular device covered one eye, its multiple lenses whirring and shifting, ticking like a pocket watch as it studied her.

“All around you is Current,” he said, his voice low and unhurried.

Idonea’s throat clenched. She knew she faced certain death; she'd blood all over her.

The Templar stepped closer. “Our sensor found you out, and then you killed her.” His uncovered eye flicked to the corpse behind the stall. “And based on the injuries… you must be a Riven.”

“No.” The word barely made it past her lips. Her shoulders hunched forward, and tears pricked her eyes. She was smarter than this.

“Your name.” His tone brooked no argument.

Idonea looked up and searched the sky for Lance. He was gone.

"…Idonea." Her hand flicked downward. Her dagger was always close, she pressed her ring finger down onto its blade, slicing open flesh.

"Quick," the Templar said. "Shackle her!"

Rough hands seized her wrists, clamping cold metal over them. Blue-black shackles, like the cuffs the dying women wore, closed over her wrists. The Current vanished. Not faded, gone. Pain hollowed her chest instantly. Idonea gasped. The world flattened into dead silence.

Another Templar patted down her sides. A practised search. Fingers pried away both the dagger and hand crossbow. They failed to find the torn page on the relic.

"You're to come with us to the Temple of Radiant Dawn," the lead Templar said. "There you'll await judgement."

Idonea's muscles tensed. "Judgement?"

He pulled hard on her arm. "Yes. You'll receive no clemency."

Another Templar scoffed behind him. "We should just throw her out on the street like the rest."

Pain rested in the back of her throat.

"No." The lead Templar shook his head. "We must stick to the accords. She'll face the High Hierophant."

Idonea staggered forward as the Templars closed in around her, their footsteps rhythmical against the stones. Idonea didn't resist, keeping her head down. She reached for the Current, but there was nothing to touch.

Would they care if I told them about the relic? About Nellith? Her lips tightened. *No. Not unless it served their Order.*

The city changed as they moved further from the hub. Clean, organised brick replaced the grime. The stink of steam engines lessened, and the streets grew quieter.

One of the Templars flanking her had a pentocular that was visibly cracked along the outermost lens. The crack ran from edge to centre in a fine pale line, and the mechanisms behind it ticked slightly out of time with his right boot.

White stone, towering columns and a roof of copper domes and glass spires that caught the sun. Stained glass windows wept coloured light across the steps; five of them, each spotless. Bronze doors creaked open, and two Templars greeted them in silence.

Inside were tall marble pillars, with soaring ceilings, and an open hallway that gleamed white. At the end of the hall was a massive mural of the moment before the sun rose. Three men in aprons brushed past them, faces down.

“Who are they?” Idonea asked. She rubbed her fingers against the metal cuffs and found no latches to undo them. It was like they’d sealed the moment they clapped over her wrists.

The Templar guiding her didn’t slow. “They are our artificers.”

He steered her left, towards a door that looked more like a vault. Iron-bound and secured with locks that hissed and clicked with steam-driven intent. It groaned open, and she pushed forward, down a stairwell of pale stone.

Stone became stained cement, then gave way to straw and stench. The cell bars were the same blue-black metal as her shackles. He pulled her forward, and she'd no choice but to follow, dragging her feet as they went. The pungent smell of body odour and other filth permeated her pores, and it was like there wasn't enough oxygen to breathe.

A haggard-looking man occupied one, indifferent as they passed. The Templar led her to the furthest one. They stripped her without fanfare: the cuffs, the belt, her satchel, goggles, and mask. They at least let her keep her glasses. But the connection to the Current didn’t return. The emptiness behind her ribs frightened her more than the Templars.

“Why take them off?” Idonea rubbed at her wrists.

He smirked. “The cells alone keep you severed.”

He shoved her into the cell and slammed the gate shut. The key locked it in place, and two Templars left. The cell didn’t even have a cot to sleep on, just the straw floor.

“Answer me this, witch,” said the remaining Templar. “Which island did you come from?”

Her breath hitched at the stench surrounding her. “Vazduhului.” The lie rolled off her tongue with ease. At least if they checked the docks for any airships, they couldn’t link the Clockwork Crows back to her arrival.

He raised an eyebrow. “Your kind never leaves that island.” He then left without another word, leaving her alone.

It was true. Vazduhului was an island nation known to be ruled by witches.

Tears burned her eyes, and she let them brim over her cheeks. She slumped down onto the old straw, not caring what filth she sat in. Without Current, she was nothing but flesh.

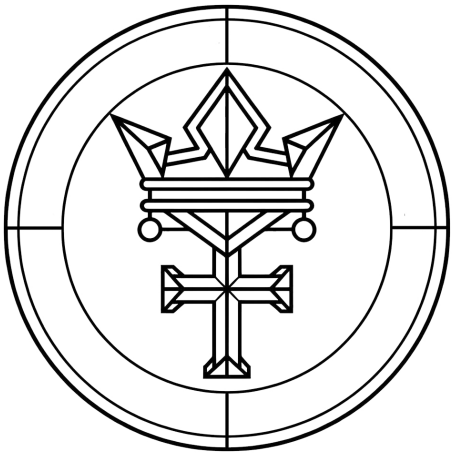
She dipped her hand into her blouse and dug out the bee Safira gifted her, turning it around in her hands. The pirates probably hadn’t left yet, but she also doubted they’d risk their lives for a jailbreak attempt.

She sighed and tucked the bee safely out of sight, right near the tightly folded relic parchment.

Down here, Lance wouldn’t risk flying, not when he would need to get past the Templars first.

She closed her eyes against the stone.

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Chapter 8

The walls pressed in. Idonea had lost count of the hours; her limbs ached, and her fingers trembled from the chill.

Eventually, she broke the silence. “You alive over there?”

A grunt answered. Male, rough, uninterested.

If they used these cells to prevent usage of Current, he could’ve been a warlock. Though being nearly extinct, it was possible. Maybe he’d seen her bloodied state and wanted nothing to do with her.

“Fine,” she muttered, “be that way.”

She shifted, and a sharp discomfort flared in her hips. The ground was unforgiving. Her stomach growled while exhaustion dragged at her, heavy and warm. But sleep was dangerous, especially when the Templars could return at any moment.

Footsteps, deliberately slow, echoed off the spiral stone stairwell.

Idonea scrambled up from the ground and brushed off loose bits of straw that stuck to the lace, and adjusted her glasses. She didn't look away, and the fine hairs on her neck rose as a shadow spilled down the corridor.

A man stepped into the gaslamp light. A Templar, but not like the others. His posture remained too relaxed for a dungeon. That unsettled her first. The sword at his hip sat worn low and easy, like he expected to use it quickly. Only afterwards did she notice he was unfairly beautiful.

His face was all chiselled lines and noble angles. His goatee neatly trimmed, his skin an olive-tone, cool under the light. One eye, a stormy grey-blue, locked onto her. The other was hidden beneath a pentocular, humming faintly. His tabard was absent from his chest, while his long coat was blacker than pitch, trimmed in silver. Chains hung loosely from his gauntlets, each one tipped with a tiny silver sunburst.

Her throat tightened. The uniform must’ve marked him as high-ranking. Lean, muscled, and only a few winters older than she. Annoying.

She was exhausted, trapped, and close to death. This wasn't the time for her body to become stupid.

Then the reminder of her chained and broken brethren flashed to the front of her mind. Idonea swallowed. Templars should disgust her. The rest of her body had apparently missed that instruction.

He stopped a hand’s length from the cell, posture relaxed. A copper sun ring gleamed on his right hand. He smelled of pine and nutmeg, reminding her of home, and beneath it, a dry and bitter scent she couldn't place. It was gone before she registered it.

“Your name is Idonea?” His voice was quiet, and controlled. Dangerously controlled.

His gaze roved over her, reading her, not wanting her. They caught on the sliced sleeve where Idonea had cut her wrist.

She licked her lips. “Yes. Who’s asking?” The air tensed, prickling her arms.

His face betrayed nothing. “I’m Lysander.”

The name didn't fit the rest of him. If he wasn’t a Templar, what was he?

“And?” Idonea raised an eyebrow, taking a step closer to the bars.

“You told the others you hailed from Vazduhului,” he said. His lips didn’t twitch.

“What of it?” Her eyes tracked back to his lips, then again to the sword.

“You’re from Draugaros, aren’t you?”

Idonea held his eyes and refused to speak. If he thought she’d trust him just because he'd a pretty face, he’d underestimated her.

“Fine,” he murmured. “But let me confirm one thing.”

Her eyes narrowed. “Confirm what?”

He blinked once. “That you are, indeed, Idonea.”

“I see,” she said, wrapping her fingers around the cell bars. “I could lie.”

A ghost of a smile brushed his lips, but it never reached his eye. That single, stormy-hued eye drifted to her hands.

“Perhaps,” he said. “Give me your left arm.”

She pulled back. “No.” She crossed her arms over her chest.

He flexed his gloved left hand. “I will not harm you.”

His look was heavy, lids drooped, making his face unreadable. The steadiness in his voice was deliberate, making it hard to resist.

Against her better judgement, she extended her arm. Shivers tingled down her spine as his warm fingers smoothed over her inner wrist. With his left hand, he pulled out a vial of salt, and she tensed a little under his grip. Salt scraped across her wrist. The tattoo bloomed instantly beneath her skin. Idonea jerked hard enough that the bars rattled.

He let her arm go. “You’ve got the mark.”

Only one person alive knew she'd that tattoo.

“Why are you here?” he asked.

Idonea shook her head. “I’m not divulging that.”

He didn’t seem surprised at her refusal.

“Answer me this,” Idonea said. “This metal, the bars. Do you know what it is?”

“Of course.” If he suspected her of anything, he gave no hint. “Lodestone alloyed with adamant and Eitr. We call it Lodamante.”

She exhaled. *Eitr. That’s what’s cutting me off.* The venom of ancient roots tempered into metal.

“Thank you.” Safira was right that the Temple was using it.

That warranted her a flash of a smile. “You must be her.”

Idonea's stomach tightened. “Who?”

But Lysander had already turned, his long coat flaring as he walked away, golden heelplates clinking against the stone.

No farewell, or glance back. She lingered near the cell bars, hoping he’d return soon.

But only another Templar came. This one younger, less elegant, with a bowl of greasy stew and a crust of stale rye bread. She devoured it anyway.

Kicking aside the straw until she'd a mostly straw-free area to curl upon, Idonea laid down. Face down near the concrete, the mustiness amplified itself, and the concrete was cold against her skin. At the other end of the dungeon, a cell door creaked open, but her eyes were too heavy to open.

The clang of metal on metal shattered the silence. Idonea’s eyes flew open, cold stone pressed against her back. Outside the iron bars, the same Templar who’d thrown her into the cell stood, mace in hand.

He’d rapped the weapon against the gate with deliberate force.

“Up you get, witch,” he said, voice thick as gravel.

Her limbs protested as she sat, slow and groggy. Her nails snagged in matted curls, and strands clung together with sweat and blood.

“No point in making yourself pretty.”

Idonea’s gaze cut to him. “It isn’t for your benefit.”

“You’re being taken up to judgement.”

Her throat clenched and her hands trembled as she smoothed out the lace ruffles in her skirt, which was now a grubby off-white. The blood stains darker.

The gate unlocked, and she forced her leaden feet forward. He snapped the Lodamante cuffs back over her wrists. Even before being taken up, Idonea knew she’d not tell them of the relic, or of Nellith.

“What time is it?” she asked, wondering how much time she’d lost.

“Dawn, of course,” he said. “When judgement is ripe.”

She had no reply, her throat was dry as a bone. They passed the cell the male was in the day before. It now stood empty.

They climbed the white stone steps and at the top waited another Templar, silent, and stern. He turned without a word, and together they led her deeper into the sanctum. They ascended more steps, through a high golden arch into the ceremonial hall. Clouds swirling across a fresco of a dawn sky adorned the concave ceiling; the artistry was flawless. Rich, dark wooden pews pushed to the side of the walls.

They led her to stand before a marble dais carved with the emblem of the rising sun. A single chair resembling a throne towered over her.

Idonea glanced around the room; it was only her and the two Templars. The desire to flee pulsed underneath her skin.

From a side door on the dais walked a man in a hooded flowing gold robe, cinched with a red sash. He seated himself on the chair, white-gloved hands resting on the arms. A golden circlet sat atop his head over the hood while a white silk veil masked his face.

Then another man, one of the artificers, walked in and stood behind the chair. He wore gadget-like goggles over both eyes. An empty feeling settled in her stomach, and she twitched at every sound.

“This is the accused Riven?” asked the robed man. The one Idonea assumed was the High Hierophant.

“Yes, your radiance. This is she,” the Templar said.

The High Hierophant tapped a finger against the chair. “Anything to say on your behalf?”

Idonea licked her lips and shuffled forward, eyes fixed on his veil. “Yes. You will regret this.”

The High Hierophant breathed a laugh. “Will I?”

She shrugged. “We’ll see.”

“Rivens don’t walk freely in the Republic, and they don’t make threats.”

Idonea glanced at the Templars and the futility of it all slammed into her. They would never give her fair judgement.

The High Hierophant gave a low chuckle. “You have spirit, though.”

Her eyes narrowed. “This isn’t right. And you know it.” Her knees went weak, and she staggered to stand straight.

He straightened in his chair and pulled his shoulders back. “No.” He glanced at the artificer behind him. “Could you use a Riven with the technologies?”

The artificer shook his head. “No. She’s too volatile.”

Idonea’s eyes snapped towards him. She wasn’t volatile. Could he sense something on her she couldn’t?

“You’re certain?” the High Hierophant asked. The artificer nodded. “Very well.” He faced Idonea. “You murdered our sensor. Your true nature cannot be denied.”

“A sensor?” Idonea didn’t mean for it to slip out.

“Oh yes,” he said. “We blind a witch, keeping their link to the Current.”

Then he smiled. “What a radical idea. You can either be shackled or become my replacement sensor. I need one, after all. Since you murdered her.”

Acid turned in her stomach and she staggered back.

“Silence. Very well. Under the accords, I decree you volatile, unfit for reformation. You’ll be shackled. You’ll never access the Current again.”

A cry tore from Idonea as her knees buckled.

“Seal her palms,” the High Hierophant said.

Her head snapped up to him as terror lanced through her at his words. The closest Templar hauled her to her feet, but she refused to stand.

Two sets of boots rang against the smooth stone surface behind her. A sob heaved her chest.

“Brother Alcaeus,” the High Hierophant said. “What do I owe this interruption to?”

“You must release her into my custody.” Something twinged in her brain. The pitch of it, the deliberate slowness. That voice belonged

somewhere in her past.

“I’d heard you’d sent your Severant to see her,” the High Hierophant said.

She turned, breath catching in her throat.

Lysander. *No.*

“Yes,” Alcaeus said. “I did. She is my daughter.”

The room lurched sideways. Idonea's pulse stumbled once. *No, no, no*.

The father who left when she was ten. The one who broke Nellith’s heart. She loathed him. From his dark hair that curled loosely above his brow, to his slightly crooked nose, and light brown skin, and even his deep, amber eyes that crinkled at the corner when he smiled. Hated every part of him.

And Lysander was a Severant, a daemonbreaker. A specialised suborder created to hunt and bind daemons, and Rivens, too.

Alcaeus’ uniform was very similar to the Templars, except with a single embellished pauldron in gold.

The High Hierophant stood from his chair. “She is, is she?” Idonea wished the High Hierophant's face was visible. His voice remained controlled, as if not surprised.

Alcaeus nodded. “This is Idonea, and as she is twenty-five winters, unmarried, her responsibility falls to me.”

“And you don’t think it’s interesting that you were back in the capital at the same time your daughter shows up?”

“No, I don’t,” Alcaeus said. “I’d call it fate.”

“What makes you think I’d let you take a Riven without being at least shackled, Brother?”

Her eyes widened. “He can’t take me.”

Lysander moved as the others spoke; each step brought him closer to her position on the floor.

“Brother Alcaeus,” the High Hierophant said, “see, she prefers shackles to your custody.”

Idonea’s father shook his head. “She does not know of what she speaks,” he said. “Her mind’s been poisoned by her mother. She hasn’t had a role model. Let me take her with me. Let me shape her into a witch that walks the path of light rather than the darkness she practises.”

With a hand wave from the High Hierophant, the Templar released his grip from her arm. She glared at Alcaeus and wished she didn’t have the

metal cuffs on.

“What if you cannot bring her away from the darkness?”

“Then you may shackle her as required by the Accords,” Alcaeus said.

“Very well,” the High Hierophant said with a nod. “The girl is yours. Take care, Brother Alcaeus, for you’ve taken a dragon into your nest.”

Idonea smiled, mirth blooming from how accurate his words were.

Lysander offered his right hand. Her gaze met his eye, his scent again a familiar reminder of her home. His forearm was corded with muscle, while his left remained obscured under a loose sleeve.

“Let me help you, witchling.” Teasing tinged his words.

She bristled at the word, at the kindness. Warmth spread through her palm where he held it. Idonea hated how quickly her body relaxed.

The High Hierophant left the dais, the two Templars and artificer following behind. It was just her, Lysander, and her dreaded father. Her father removed the cuffs, and her wrists ached with sudden freedom. He handed her all her belongings, and she strapped on her utility belt and satchel, sheathing her dagger. They had kept the crossbow, she suspected it would already be in the Templar armoury.

“We’re trusting you with that,” Alcaeus said.

She scowled at him. “You’ve no right.”

He sighed. “Show some gratitude. You’ve no idea what I saved you from, daughter.”

“Don’t call me that.” She jerked her head towards him, eyes flashing. “Don’t dare call me that.” She spied Lysander taking a few steps back, as if to give them distance.

“Very well.” Alcaeus’ jaw tightened. “Idonea it is.”

“Will you let me go my way?” she asked.

His eyebrows drew together. “I will not break my oath. I am an Exemplar of the Order.”

Idonea scoffed. “I’ve more important matters than your rank within this poisonous order.”

Alcaeus cleared his throat. “Like it or not. Your path is now with me. Tomorrow, we leave the capital.” He glanced at her appearance. “The sooner the better.”

“How will you force me?” Her hands clenched. She’d sacrifice a few years of her life if it meant obliterating this temple to escape.

“Because you wouldn’t hurt an innocent.”

She raised an eyebrow. “It has been fifteen years. I am no longer that girl.”

His eyes fell to her tattoos, scars, and the blood flecks. “No, clearly not. But you need a bath and new clothes.”

“I like these clothes.” She glowered at him, silently begging him to give her a reason.

He glanced at Lysander, who she’d forgot stood there; he was silent and still. “Make her come along. If she lingers here, the High Hierophant may get peevish.” Alcaeus turned and strode towards the archway.

Lysander touched her lightly on the arm. “Let’s go, witchling.” She *hmphed* at him in response. “Elsewhere is better than here.”

She didn’t respond but followed him out of the accursed white temple. Out in the rising sun, she welcomed the fresh air, even if the cold bit into her flesh. Her eyes caught a shimmer of Lance’s scales. So, he’d stuck around. She contained her smile and followed Lysander, but kept a larger distance from her father.

They led her to a narrow-terraced house, which was three stories high. Lysander locked the door behind them, and Alcaeus stood within a sitting room.

Idonea took a deep breath. “You haven’t asked why I am here.”

Alcaeus relaxed back into the armchair, Idonea noting the salt-and-pepper scruff tracing his jaw. “Well, enlighten me.”

“Nellith has vanished,” Idonea said. “I suspect daemon involvement. And…” She closed her eyes. She had to impress the urgency, the danger. “She had the Heart of Ffyrnedd.”

Lysander tensed beside her while Alcaeus let out a string of curses. Idonea sucked in a breath. They both knew exactly of what she spoke. She wouldn’t let them know about Vinea’s suspected involvement.

“You should've told the High Hierophant,” Alcaeus said and made to stand. “That would explain the heightened Nexis activity we’ve sensed.”

“No!” Idonea’s outburst stilled Alcaeus. “The order does not have the means to truly deal with this. They, you, fear such things. Fear the Nexis. This is explicitly linked to it. Mishandling it would be catastrophic. Nellith knew she’d be taken, or at least, she’d have to hide. She left me clues. I must do this.” She snapped her gaze to Lysander, who thankfully stayed still.

“My oath is unbreakable, Idonea.” Alcaeus shook his head. “You’ll come with me.”

Idonea slammed her foot down onto the floor. “Your oath is not bound in blood. It *is* breakable.” Current shimmered nearby. Lysander’s left hand twitched.

Alcaeus stood. “What would you have of me?”

She took a step back, shocked at his question. “Let me find Nellith and this relic. Put a stop to the daemon.”

“A high daemon, isn’t it?” Alcaeus rubbed at his temple.

Idonea nodded. “I’m stronger than you know.”

His gaze went to Lysander. “He will accompany you. You have a week, and then he brings you to me.”

She smiled. “And what is stopping me from giving him the slip?”

Lysander cleared his throat. “Then you’ll die alone.”

Idonea looked between her father and the Severant, weighing her options. “Fine. A week.” *A Daemonbreaker would be useful*.

“Good,” Alcaeus said. “Go wash up.”

Lysander guided her to the bathing chamber, stopping outside the door and nodded to it.

“In there,” he said.

Idonea arched a brow. “You expect me to bathe while you stand guard?”

His jaw tightened a fraction, but his expression stayed level. “You’d prefer the alternative? Your father?”

Her lips parted, then shut again. “Fine.”

He pushed the door open for her and stepped aside. The faintest curl of steam met them, carrying the sharp scent of cedar oil and iron pipes. The chamber was all pale marble and brass fixtures. A large copper tub dominated the room, filled near to the brim, heat rising from it.

Heat climbed her neck as she stepped into the room. The mirror caught every bruise immediately. *Wonderful*.

Lysander lingered at the door, one hand braced against the frame. “There are clean linens. Soap. Try not to drown.”

She shot him a glare. “How gallant of you.”

A ghost of a smile crossed his face. “If you die, I’ll have a hard time with your father.”

Idonea turned her back to him and began untying the blood-crusted laces of her bodice. “Well, stay out.”

She half expected him to leave without another word. Instead, he spoke, voice low, steady. “The door locks from inside. But if you faint, I’m coming in. Whether or not you’re dressed.”

Her pulse stuttered. “How noble.”

“No,” he said, “just practical.”

The door clicked shut behind him.

Idonea sank into the copper tub with a hiss as heat licked across her bruises. Heat hit hard enough to ache. The water turned murky immediately. She rested her head back against the rim, closing her eyes. For one dangerous second, she thought she might fall asleep in the water. Through the door, boots shifted against the hallway floor. He was still there, standing guard, just as he’d promised. For a man of the Order, he didn’t feel like one.

When the water had cooled and life returned to her heavy limbs, she wrapped herself in the rough linen towel and stepped out. The door creaked open before she reached for the latch.

Lysander filled the doorway, posture straight as a blade. His gaze moved over her once, quick and clinical. Still enough to make heat crawl up her neck. He handed her a folded bundle, clean clothes. “They’ll fit well enough,” he said.

She accepted them warily. “You always this accommodating to prisoners?”

His gaze lifted, unreadable. “Only the ones who bite.”

Her lips twitched despite herself. “Then you should stay wary.”

“I intend to.”

He turned his back, giving her privacy again, though tension bracketed his shoulders. The light from the hall glinted off the chain at his wrist.

When she finished dressing, she found him waiting near the stairwell. His eye caught hers, and neither spoke.

“You clean up well, witchling.”

She folded her arms. “Don’t say that again.”

He half-smiled and led her to the dining room.

At the table, she ate with her hands, letting pork grease coat her fingers. Alcaeus didn’t chastise her. Lysander only raised an eyebrow.

“Have you ridden a horse before?” Alcaeus asked.

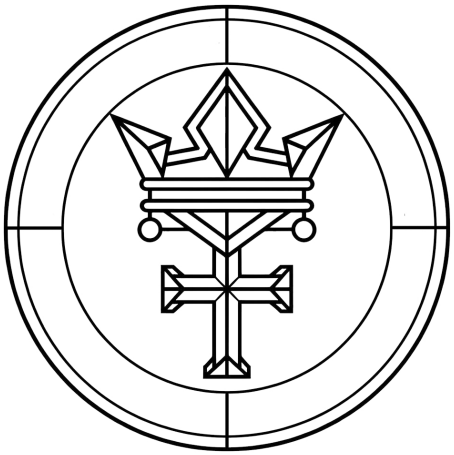
She only glared, saying nothing.

He sighed. “You’ll learn fast enough.”

Alcaeus would regret his decision. A week was enough, and she’d not be returning to him. Lysander was only one man.

Unfortunately, he looked like the sort of man capable of becoming a serious problem.

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Chapter 9

“Do you need a hand?” Alcaeus asked.

He stood at the edge of the stable yard, the morning sun haloing the high capital walls behind him.

Idonea’s foot slipped again, her boot jammed awkwardly in the stirrup for the fifth time. She turned a sharp glare on him, her jaw clenched so hard it ached, every part of her wanted to say no.

She’d saddled her own horse, a skewbald mare with a strong back and restless energy. The mare had been patient so far, even as Idonea flailed against the height and weight of the saddle, but the creature fidgeted now, flicking her tail and tossing her head.

"Idonea."

"I heard you."

"Lysander will help you."

"I don't need—"

“Lysander,” Alcaeus said, not to her. “Help her up. Time is wasting.”

Steam hissed faintly from the rail line beyond the stables. Horses shifted restlessly around her. Too many eyes, too much room to embarrass herself even if these were the private Templar stables, nestled outside the capital’s gate and close to the broad vein of the river. A mingled scent of leather, hay, dust, sweat, and manure hung in the air. Idonea took a deep breath, grateful to no longer have to wear the mask or goggles.

Lysander dismounted from his dun gelding. His coat billowed back in the breeze, the weight of silver chains glinting under the folds. He no longer wore the pentocular, but his gaze was no less piercing.

“I said I don’t need help,” Idonea muttered at his approach.

He flexed his left hand once, gloved fingers curling and loosening. “Grab the saddle horn,” he said. “I’ll give you a leg up. Your muscles aren’t strong enough to manage the height.”

Her eyes snapped to his, a flash of indignant heat. “Now you insult me?”

His mouth twitched. “Only because you’re making it easy.”

Idonea’s glare lingered on Lysander, but he was already moving.

He stopped beside her mare and set a hand to the saddle horn, palm firm. “Left foot,” he said.

“I know how to mount a horse.”

The mare tossed her head again, stamping one foot. Lysander moved closer, his shadow brushing hers. “You’ll spook her,” he said. “Hold still.”

Heat pressed briefly against her side. Too close. Her pulse reacted immediately.

He crouched, bracing a hand against her boot. “On three,” he said.

“I—”

“One.”

She barely had time to breathe before he lifted, in total control, the strength in his arms evident beneath the fabric of his coat. One moment she stood on the ground; the next, he'd got her into the saddle.

The mare huffed but settled beneath her. Idonea’s breath came sharp as she glared down at him, cheeks flushed. “I said—”

“I know what you said,” Lysander interrupted, voice muted but edged. He stepped back, brushing a stray bit of hay from his sleeve. “You’re welcome.”

She bent forward to stroke the mare’s neck, breathing in the scent: sagebrush, clean sweat, and wind. Lysander patted the mare on the left shoulder and walked back to his gelding, hoisting himself up in one fluid motion — of course he could do that.

“Time to move,” Alcaeus said. “Remember, one week. Nexis activity will only worsen.”

He was leaving too, but going directly to Krylovan, a village in the northern reaches of the Zorya region. A village he claimed to preside over.

Lysander urged his gelding forward until he drew level with her mare. Without asking, he reached for the reins, steadying her horse’s head.

“Try and relax.” His voice even, low. “If she smells fear, she’ll take advantage. Breathe slow. Deeper.”

Idonea bit back a retort. The mare’s ears flicked but settled, soothed by Lysander’s voice. Idonea glanced at the nearby oak trees and spotted Lance;

there was comfort in that notion. Her eyes strayed to Nellith’s ring on her finger.

“Relax your hips,” Lysander murmured, not looking at her.

She peeked back at the capital. The only thing that stuck above the massive walls were the white tower points of the Temple of Radiant Dawn. The mare’s gait smoothed, but she hated that his advice helped.

“I should lead,” Idonea said.

“We need distance first.”

The capital shrank behind them as they held to the compacted dirt path that ran close to the forestry of oak and beech, and Idonea watched it diminish over her shoulder. Cold air striped the last industrial stink from her lungs. The mountains ahead looked large enough to swallow people whole. For the first time since leaving Draugaros, escape felt possible.

“Can you switch to a trot?” Lysander asked.

She hesitated. “I’ll be fine.”

He studied her momentarily before flicking the reins of his gelding and her mare once. As his horse picked up pace, so did the mare. Each bump from the gait tensed her muscles.

“Tensing makes it worse,” Lysander said. “Keep your legs loose. Let your body move with the motion.”

Idonea observed the way his body rose and fell along with his horse. Wind dragged loose strands of hair across his forehead. Her knuckles whitened as she gripped the saddle horn tight, fearing she’d bounce right off. Lysander’s lips quirked up into a sly smile. Idonea forced herself to focus on the horse's gait instead of the shape of Lysander's mouth. *A humiliating sentence to exist inside her own head*.

By the time the sun dipped behind the trees, they veered off-trail and found a clearing near a bent, old oak. Oranges bled into slate blues, rays slicing through the thin clouds. Every muscle throbbed, and her thighs were raw. She hated they had wasted a whole day.

Lysander dismounted in one smooth motion, then turned towards her.

She bristled. “I don’t need—”

Before she could finish, his hands were at her waist, steady and sure. He lifted her down easily. Their faces were close, too close. Idonea hated how quickly exhaustion made her body cooperative.

Then he stepped back, quick, impersonal. “You all right?” he asked, voice gruff.

She nodded, though her legs shook beneath her. “I think so.”

Lysander gave a curt nod and turned away, leading both horses to the oak. Its branches were stout, with many twists in them, and from where she stood, she made out the deep vertical and horizontal fissures in the bark. Rusty-brown buds clustered at the end of each twig.

Lysander moved with the economical precision of someone accustomed to violence. Nothing wasted, not even stillness. He brushed the mare down with care, unstrapping saddlebags with quick, practised fingers.

She limped towards the bags he’d dropped, lowering herself onto the ground with a grunt. Stretching her legs flat, she let her head fall back, eyes closed. Her body was wrecked.

“I know something has been following us,” Lysander said as he approached her position.

Her eyes snapped open. “How long?”

He crouched beside her, gaze scanning the tree line, his hand resting lightly on the hilt at his hip. “Long enough.”

The sky had sunk into bruised indigo, stars veiled behind cloud banks. Her eyes surveyed above, heart beating fast. Lance glided nearby, a muted ripple of movement.

“What is it?” Lysander asked.

“Lance.” Idonea raised her arm.

The Iaculus dove, landing with a sharp chuff beside her, wings spread wide in warning. His forked tongue tasted the air. He hissed directly at Lysander, throat puffing with the threat.

She smirked. “He won’t hurt you. But keep your guard up.”

Lance flicked his tongue again, one eye locked on Lysander, the other on the shadows behind them. At least Lance found the Severant more irritating than her.

Lysander gave her a sideways glance. “Is that … an Iaculus?”

Idonea nodded, seeing no point in denying it. “Last of the dragonkin.”

“Didn’t think they still existed,” he murmured. “He’s not tame.”

“No,” she said. “He’s loyal.” Or so she hoped.

Lance shot into the air and coiled onto a low branch, still glowering down at Lysander. Idonea hugged her knees against the ache in her thighs, her mind drifting. Not to her pains, but to Nellith, the daemon, and the trail she'd to follow.

Lysander moved away to start a fire, but his shoulders remained tense. Before he struck the flint, he drew a silver object from an inside pocket of his coat. He sipped from it briefly, his back to her, and tucked it away before turning around. She thought, in that moment, that it was probably a liquor flask. He carried himself like a man who needed one.

She pulled out her dagger, its weight feeling right in her hand. With the fire lit, Lysander now stood at the horses, giving them both water and feed.

Idonea gathered the equipment needed for her ritual. She used her waterskin to pour water into the bowl. The needle gleamed faintly in the firelight before she pricked her finger. A drop of blood struck the surface, spreading in ripples, while her pupils thinned to slits.

She whispered Nellith's name as she wrapped the black thread around her ring.

Current churned at the edge of thought. The water pulled towards a direction; a sharp tug tore at her chest. Heat surged through her skull. Her breath hitched. The bowl spilled over.

Her eyes snapped open, and Lysander stood directly over her.

"Your eyes."

She blinked, vision straining to adjust. She slipped Nellith's ring back on her thumb. "It's nothing."

"What were you doing?" He crouched down, reaching out towards her hand, her finger still beading with blood.

She pulled her hand close to her chest. "Gaining us a direction."

"And did you?" He held out a clay bowl filled with stew.

"Yes." She took it from him. "We'll go north-west."

His face remained blank. "You're sure?"

Idonea nodded. "I'm never wrong."

"Then eat," he said. "You'll need your strength."

She shook her head and busied herself with the food. She didn't look at him. She wouldn't give him the satisfaction.

Lysander stood and walked away, as she reached into a pouch on her belt and threw a piece of pork up to Lance. He could, of course, hunt his own food now. But, something about him was growing on her. The horses gave low nickers to each other as they moved closer together.

Darkness cloaked them and the surrounding area. Idonea looked up towards the sky, her hand resting upon her collarbone, but clouds obscured

much of the stars. She used to watch them with Jovana, lying back, naming constellations until dawn.

Before Jovana there had been Dyota. Dyota hadn't known the proper names and had invented her own: *the dog with the broken paw, the woman carrying water, the star that cannot make up its mind.* Idonea had written them down in a small journal she no longer owned. She wondered, sometimes, whether Dyota had kept the names.

Hours slipped past as wind sighed through the trees. The horses huffed lowly while the fire dwindled to embers.

Lysander lay motionless on his bedroll.

When she rose, her muscles protested but obeyed. Lance soared silently ahead of her into the trees. She made it halfway to the forest's edge. A hand clamped over her mouth.

Idonea jerked violently. Cold shock slammed through her chest. Too fast, too close. Her dagger never cleared the sheath.

He pulled her sideways into the dark, sending her off-balance.

"Don't try that again." It was Lysander. His warm breath tickled the back of her neck.

Lance darted towards them and hovered close, his body poised to attack. Idonea struggled underneath Lysander's left arm as it locked over the front of her shoulders.

"You can either return to the fire," he said, "or you can continue to struggle and I'll shackle you." Lysander removed his hand from her mouth.

Shackles. The word hit like cold iron against bone. Idonea stopped struggling immediately. "It's okay, Lance."

Lance relaxed his body and flew to her side, his eyes trained on the Severant.

Lysander snatched the dagger away as he let his grip go from her shoulders. "Do you even know how to use this?"

"I can still use Current," she said, for she still had the needle.

"But you won't," he said, "will you?"

A silent beat passed. She shook her head.

"Good." He pointed with the dagger towards the fire. "You walk first, witchling."

"You weren't really asleep, were you?"

"No," he said.

Lance returned to the same tree as before. They reached the dead campfire and Lysander pointed for her to sit before lying back down beside his gear, blade still in hand.

Idonea eyed Lysander.

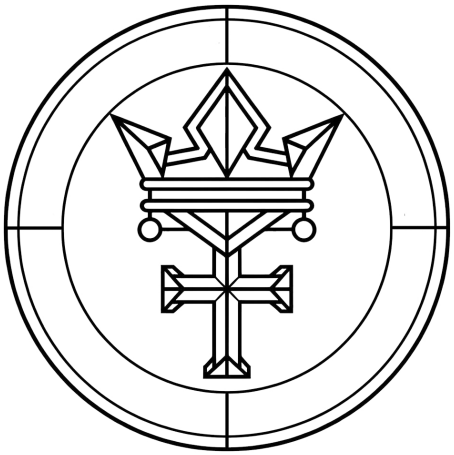
“Don’t make me tie you to me.”

Her jaw clenched. She folded her arms across her chest and lay down on the cold earth, glaring at the dark.

For a while, there was only wind.

She listened to him breathing in the dark until she slept.

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Chapter 10

Idonea woke before the sun. Cold had crept into her bones during the night. She didn’t move, and the quiet was absolute.

Lance perched high above, a dark silhouette against the paling sky. His head turned once, eyes glinting in faint morning light, before he settled again.

She pushed herself upright, stretching sore muscles, careful not to disturb the stillness. Her gaze drifted to Lysander. He lay on his side, one arm bent beneath his head, the other resting lightly near the hilt of his blade. His face was younger in sleep.

Idonea exhaled, low and deliberate. She shouldn't be watching him. Her eyes found the dagger he’d taken from her, lying unsheathed beside his hand.

“Always on guard,” she said under her breath.

He stirred, causing Idonea to freeze.

His eye opened, sharp, immediately aware. “You’re awake early.”

“I could say the same,” she said.

He sat up, scanning the tree line before answering. “I wasn’t asleep.”

“Of course you weren’t.”

Lysander stood, stretching his shoulders. He crossed to the horses, checking their tack without looking at her, moving with silent efficiency. Once the horses were ready, he came over to help Idonea back onto the mare. His hand, gloved in weathered leather, was firm beneath her elbow. She didn’t want to take it, but she also didn’t want to fall.

“Careful,” he said, voice more of a command than concern.

She winced as her still-bruised thighs met the saddle’s hard edge. He handed her the reins.

She peered over at him. “You’re sure?”

“You have our direction,” he said. “Let’s see if you're indeed never wrong.”

Idonea let the reins settle in her hands, shoulders stiff. The mare’s steady movement beneath her bones was becoming easier to balance now. She still lacked the grace of a seasoned rider. Lysander moved with the horse instead of against it. *Annoyingly effortless.*

The road gave her nothing. No daemon scent, no Current distortion, and no sign Nellith had passed this way. Only cold wind and too much distance. The silence pressed against her ears, heavy and absolute, broken only by the crunch of hooves and the occasional flap of Lance’s wings above.

Each breath stung her throat. The sun hovered low behind a veil of thin cloud.

Doubt settled cold beneath her ribs. She tightened her grip on the reins hard enough to ache. *What if the ritual was wrong?* She glanced sideways at Lysander. His expression hadn’t changed in hours; eyes fixed forward, jaw set. She envied that stillness, even as it wore on her.

By dusk, they reached a narrow rise. A gorge gaped open to the right, the land dropping into mist and craggy stone. The air had turned sharp, laced with a metallic tang, and the swollen sky promised rain. Idonea dismounted stiffly, her legs aching.

Lysander tied the horses and knelt, drawing strange objects from his pack: gears, copper wires, coils that glinted faintly, and hexagonal plates of brass.

Curious, Idonea stepped closer. “What are those?”

“Inventions, of course,” he said, not looking up. “The future is a better place because of them.”

She scoffed. “The Templars created the very things that strip witches from their birthright. That isn’t better for them.”

Lysander remained silent, but he met her gaze. “Some inventions help. Not all of them are weapons.”

“Then how,” she asked, eyes narrowing down at him, “did they learn how to unmake us?”

He paused. “Experimentation.”

She sucked in a deep breath. She heard the truth beneath the word. Blood spilled, bones broken, screams catalogued. Her spine stiffened, hands

curling into fists. Before she could reply, he tugged at the clasps of his coat and peeled back the fabric on his left arm. Idonea’s eyes widened.

Brass moved beneath the rolled sleeve. Idonea's stomach tightened instantly. Not a brace, or armour, but a replacement. The mechanisms moved smoothly enough to unsettle her.

Neither spoke for some time. The wind whistled through the gorge, tugging at their cloaks.

“Never seen a missing limb, witchling?”

She looked away, hating the pity rising inside her. She hated how much she understood.

“No,” she murmured. “I have.”

His voice softened. “Then you know.”

Lysander worked a vial of oil into the joints, then fastened the sleeve again with practised ease. The silence between them festered.

Idonea turned away and knelt by the fire. She repeated the same ritual as the night before, hoping they’d remained on the right course. Blood trickled from her nose afterwards but their direction remained unchanged. She caught his gaze across the fire and looked away.

Rain came that night. Fine at first, only a whisper against the tented canvas Lysander had rigged between two trees, then heavier, blurring the world into sound. Idonea lay awake, listening to it. The air smelled of wet oak and ash.

Lysander’s coat draped over his knees, eyes half-shuttered, but never quite closed. Even at rest, he was ready to move.

By morning, the rain had passed. Haze drifted low between the trunks. Water pooled in the ruts of the road, reflecting a sky the colour of dull steel.

They rode in silence for hours, neither keen to break it. Every so often, Lysander scanned the tree line, his gaze sharp.

Heat shimmered above the roots on their left despite the cold. Idonea's skin prickled. The trees looked burned from the inside out.

She drew her horse to a halt. “Here,” she said.

Lysander dismounted, crouching near the roots. “This is what the Order has been noticing more.”

“Nexis activity,” she agreed.

He glanced up. “Entities slipping through that shouldn’t be.”

They pressed on. Lysander started marking their direction, adjusting their pace, always angling northwest. He didn’t explain why, and Idonea

didn’t ask.

By the fourth day, she'd the rhythm of the mare’s gait. The ride no longer jarred every bone in her body. They crested a low mountain range where the forests thinned, oaks and beeches gave way to skeletal spruce and fir.

The sun hung lower over the horizon. Cold wind bit into her exposed arms and legs, and lichen grew at the bases of trees and the earth dampened. Flecks of snow dotted the horizon ahead. The path was taking them into Zorya whether or not she willed it. The terrain slowed them down.

Lysander raised a hand. “Halt.”

She reined in the mare as he scanned the sky.

“Into the trees. Now.” His voice sharp.

Idonea frowned. The trees were bare, with little cover to be had.

“What is it?”

He grabbed her reins, his mechanical grip like iron, and led her beneath the gnarled branches.

Lysander pointed towards the sky. “Pirates.”

Her heart leapt into her throat. She shielded her eyes — she’d recognise that ship anywhere; it was the Clockwork Crows.

Lysander helped her dismount. The hum of its engines vibrated in her bones, and Current stirred inside her. Cold metal snapped around her wrists. The Current recoiled instantly. Idonea jerked hard enough to rattle the chain. *Not again*. She scowled at Lysander.

“Not smart,” he said. “You want to bring pirates down on us? They’ve launched a scout.”

Idonea shot a look at Lance, urging him with her eyes to ensure he remained hidden.

“I’m cutting a horse loose,” Lysander whispered. He removed the bags, slapped the mare’s flank, and sent her galloping back down the mountain. *I had started to like that mare.*

The whir of propellers grew louder as dust flared around them. Lysander yanked her down beside him, his hand clamping over her mouth. She tensed.

“Anything?” drifted a voice. It was Kerem.

Idonea tried to pry Lysander’s fingers off her mouth, but he wouldn’t budge. No amount of movement shook him off.

“Nay, sir,” was the response. “Whoever it was must know a different path.”

“Wait,” said Kerem. “Is that a horse?”

In a last-ditch effort, Idonea rammed her elbow into Lysander’s side, but under the noise of the propellers, his surprised grunt was lost.

The ship flew away, chasing the decoy. When the sound faded, Lysander released her.

“You should’ve let them take me,” Idonea said, wiping the dirt from her hands onto the skirt, though the cuffs made it hard. If the Crows found her, she could’ve pleaded her case with Safira to hunt down the daemon. She might've freed herself from the Severant, and the other Templars.

Lysander shook his head. “You’re safer with me.”

Idonea held out her cuffed wrists. “Doesn’t feel safer.”

Lysander’s eyes met hers, seconds ticked by in strained silence. Then he stepped closer and released the cuffs. The metal fell away.

He turned to the lone remaining horse and tightened the saddle. Idonea followed, rubbing her wrists.

She swallowed. “I’ll walk.”

“No.” Lysander patted the saddle, then cinched it tighter, the leather groaning beneath his grip. “Up you come.” The gelding snorted.

Her head tilted. “You’re asking for trouble.”

Lysander didn’t respond, his expression unchanging.

She stopped beside the horse, brushing her fingers along the horn. “You’ll let me sit behind you? You trust me that much?”

He met her gaze, cold and unreadable. “You’re not.”

Her brows lifted, a soft laugh escaping her. “You trust me with the reins?”

“I’m not giving you the reins.”

She mounted the horse, sliding into the saddle with an ease that came after days of practice. Idonea settled into place, back straight and head turned, waiting.

Lysander mounted behind her. The saddle was built for one, leaving no room for modest distance. His chest pressed against her back; his legs bracketed hers. His left arm snaked around her middle, while his right took hold of the reins. Heat spread immediately through every place he touched. Her body relaxed before her mind approved.

“You should let me walk.” Idonea tried to pull forward to create distance between them, but his arm only tightened.

Lance darted out of some trees, his wings fluttering while he paused near her head. She gave him a nod.

Idonea tilted her head towards Lysander, not quite turning. Her voice a murmur. “Careful, Severant. Sit too close, and you might forget what I am.”

Lysander leaned in, lips near her ear. “Never fear, witchling. That won’t happen.”

The horse moved forward with a nudge of his heel, hooves clicking against the frost-bitten earth. Wind sighed through the branches.

They rode in silence for a time, save for the gelding’s gait and the distant rustle of wind. Idonea’s breath misted in the air.

“How many daemons have you hunted?” she asked.

Lysander didn’t answer. The only sound was his heartbeat against her spine. He was a fortress, and yet his grip on the reins was relaxed.

“You know,” she went on, a smile curling her lips, “you keep pretending you’re not afraid of me, but you used those cuffs awfully quick.”

Still nothing. A low hiss broke the hush. Lance again, circling once above the trees before vanishing.

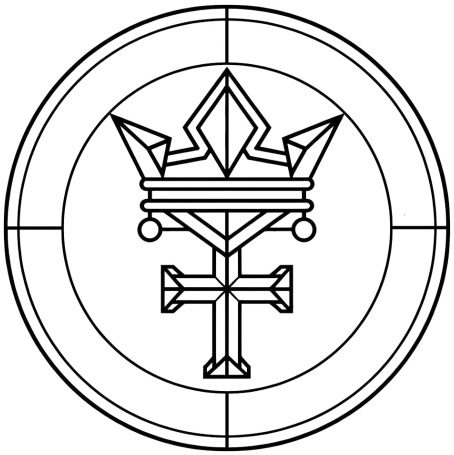
Lysander’s body tensed behind her. Idonea’s smile vanished and her posture changed. She pricked a finger on her needle, gathering a flicker of Current in her palm.

Ahead, the path narrowed into a hollow between two crumbling hills. It was too silent.

“You feel that?” she murmured.

“Yes.” This time, his voice was low, clipped. “I feel it.”

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Chapter II

A sharp crack split the air, wood snapping, echoing through the trees.

The gelding reared, nostrils flaring. Idonea’s stomach lurched as the world tilted backwards. Lysander’s left arm cinched tighter around her waist, anchoring her as his right hand fought the reins. The horse bucked once before Lysander’s low murmur cut through the chaos.

“Easy. Easy.”

The animal trembled but stilled, breath steaming in the cold air.

Shadows spilled out of the hollow. Hooded figures fanned across the path, steel glinting in their hands.

Lysander drove his heel into the gelding’s flank. “Hold on.”

The horse surged forward, muscles bunching under them as they tore down the narrow path. Idonea gripped the saddle horn, fingers burning against the slick leather. Current flared around her.

An attacker lunged from the left, dagger raised.

A shadow dropped from above. Lance struck like a spear. Bone cracked, ribs shattering outward as the man collapsed, lifeless before he hit the ground. Blood sprayed in a fine mist across Idonea’s arm, warm against the cold.

Another emerged ahead, bowstring drawn.

“Down!” Lysander pulled her against him. His body folded over hers as the arrow passed, close enough to graze her cheek.

The horse thundered between the attackers. Lysander drew his sword.

As they passed the archer, Lysander's sword flashed once. Blood sprayed hot across the path. The body fell apart before Idonea fully understood what she'd seen.

The sound of pursuit faded behind them.

Idonea’s breath came in ragged bursts. Lysander’s jaw was tight, eyes fixed ahead.

He hadn’t slowed.

“Lysander—”

She had to tell him what she’d spied upon their foreheads, what they’d tried to hide beneath their hoods: a sigil scarred into flesh. Daemon marked. Their souls sold. She’d only heard the stories, never thinking she’d encounter a person desperate enough for that.

“Not yet.”

His heartbeat stayed maddeningly steady against her spine. Idonea hated how much she noticed. Lance flew down to their level, his tongue flickering out, streaks of blood still coating his scales.

She had not, before this journey, expected him to fight for her. He had hated her for as long as she'd been alive to be hated. Twice now he'd killed for her without being asked. She didn't know when he'd decided. She didn't know whether to thank him for it or be afraid of what it meant.

Lysander guided the horse up a narrow trail leading towards the ridge, pulling the reins, bringing the gelding to a stop.

The silence that followed was sharp. Lance circled once overhead.

Lysander wiped the blade clean, eyes never leaving the tree line. “They were waiting for us. For you.”

Idonea swallowed. “They will follow.”

“Let them.”

She pulled her dagger free, thankful he’d given it back.

Idonea glanced back as the trees moved.

The treeline groaned, branches snapping, and something massive stepped into view.

Idonea's stomach dropped instantly. It was wrong in every possible way.

Twice the height of a man, its form wreathed in coarse black fur, with limbs too long and eyes like burning coals sunk deep into a skull far too human in appearance. A daemon thrall. A lesser entity, but still deadly. It let out a rasping growl.

Idonea cursed. “They must’ve let it out of the veil.”

The thrall crashed after them with terrifying speed, limbs galloping like a hound. Branches exploded outward.

Lysander turned the gelding hard, taking them up a switchback path lined with brittle spruce.

Lysander swore quietly. “We're not outrunning that.”

“I know.” Idonea twisted in the saddle, planting one foot atop his in the stirrup for leverage. “Don’t let me fall.”

Lysander didn’t argue. He threw the reins forward, driving the horse into a tight curve, hauling it to a sudden stop on a high ridge overlooking the hollow.

Idonea stood, ignoring the quaver in her legs. She slashed her palm open, letting the Current ignite the droplets into a crimson light, coiling into the shape of a thin, burning whip. She swung its form towards the thrall, lashing it with liquid flame.

Idonea’s skin turned cold. The thrall staggered a step.

She leaped down from the horse, forming a quick circle with her spilled blood, and traced a quick daemon sigil within its confines. The daemon thrashed, as if their limbs were caught within a thick mud.

Sharp nausea flooded her body.

“Not enough!” Lysander leapt down behind her and drew his sword.

The thrall roared and regained its footing. Lysander met it head-on, steel clanging against claw. He ducked low, slashing across a clawed hand. The creature reeled.

Idonea swallowed. There was no time for a proper ritual. She pressed her blade to her forearm, took a deep breath, and slashed the skin open.

Her eyes locked onto the thrall's, drawing a second circle with the freshly spilt blood. Her blood pulsed along the lines, as if a heartbeat.

Air rippled in crimson around them, and Lysander whipped a silver chain out of his coat. The taste of iron flooded her mouth, the world pressing down upon her.

Idonea screamed. The Current ruptured outward. Pain ripped through her chest. The thrall vanished, forced back through the Nexis.

She collapsed as silence descended. Her pulse fluttered unevenly. For a second, Idonea wondered if she'd torn something inside herself permanently.

Lysander flicked gore from his sword. He stood perfectly still, listening. No breath but theirs. He exhaled once, then turned to her.

Idonea was on her knees, blood slicking her forearm, her chest heaving. She was torn between wanting to pass out and hurling. The circle still pulsed faintly beneath her, veins of red light faded into the earth.

He knelt beside her, careful not to touch the sigil. “You can’t keep bleeding yourself like that,” he said. “It’s reckless.”

Her lips moved, but the only sound was a rasp. The effort had hollowed her out.

Lysander rose, scanning the horizon. He reached into his coat and brought out two flasks — a silver one and a larger leather one. He pocketed the silver and offered her the leather. "Drink."

She hesitated, then took it, grimacing as the liquor burned its way down. When she handed it back, his gaze lingered on her arm, the raw, hasty cut. He tore a strip from his sleeve and wrapped it with quick, practised motions.

“Daemon thralls are meant to stay near the Nexis veils,” he said, eyes narrowing towards the treeline.

Idonea sat where she'd fallen, and she didn't try to stand yet. Cold seeped up through her trousers, and she let it; she'd stand soon.

Lance swooped low, landing beside them. His scaled head tilted towards Lysander, then Idonea, as if measuring their state. The horse shifted behind them, stamping nervously in the dirt. The wind had picked up again.

Lysander rose, unfastening the Lodamante cuffs from his belt and hurled them off the ridge.

Idonea blinked. “Why?”

He looked down at her, something indiscernible flickering in his expression. “Because we’ll die otherwise.”

She swallowed hard. Her lips parted, but she found no words.

He turned away, sliding his sword back into its sheath.

“I’ve buried people for less trust than that.” She pressed her palm to the ground, feeling the last trace of the sigil fade.

“Don’t make me regret it.”

Idonea staggered back to her feet.

“Ten minutes. Then we ride.”

Her voice was a whisper. “You make it sound easy.”

Lysander glanced back, one corner of his mouth twitching. “It never is.”



They found a shallow grove off the main trail, nestled between a crescent of stone and leaning trees. The ground there was soft, the air heavy with the damp scent of moss.

Lysander sat across from her, the flickering light catching the angles of his face, casting his eyes deep in shadow. He sharpened his blade with long, deliberate strokes.

“Did you, or Alcaeus, tell anyone what I said of the relic?” Idonea asked, properly tending to her arm and hand.

“Of course not,” he said, his gaze cutting to her. “Is that why we were attacked?”

Her expression shuttered. “Perhaps.” She tied off the bandage with her teeth. “Daemons would do anything for a stable path to this plane.”

“A second Sundering,” Lysander murmured.

She nodded. “But we don’t have it. We must be on the right path.”

Lysander’s brows drew together. “Would your tracking have alerted them?”

The wind picked up, causing her to shiver. She pulled her cloak tighter around her shoulders.

“Possibly.” Her brows pulled together. “But … why would they stop us from finding it?”

Current still hummed faintly beneath her skin, a residual tremor. She hated the weakness of it. Lance flew down beside her, letting out a muted hiss, his presence steadying her.

“They could see you as competition.” He tossed her a piece of hard bread and a strip of dried meat. “Eat something.”

Idonea caught them, frowning. “You always order people around like that?”

He shrugged. “Only the ones trying to get themselves killed.”

Her glare was half-hearted. She chewed the bread, eyes drifting to the dark. “You should sleep. I’ll take first watch.”

He studied her, eyes falling to her bandages. “You’re sure?”

She smiled faintly. “I’ll wake you if I decide on murder.”

He gave the barest twitch of a smirk and laid back. His hand remained close to his sword. For a while, Idonea listened to his breathing and the soft crackle of fire. Idonea turned her gaze skyward. The stars above were stark. Her hand found its way to her collarbone, tracing the stars upon them.

The fire burned low, its heart a dull, red pulse in the dark. Cold crept in at the edges of the grove now that the wind had fallen still.

Idonea shifted closer to the fire, extending her hands towards the fading warmth.

Her spine straightened. Breathing — too low for a beast. Too controlled for anything natural. A rhythm measured and deliberate. Lance still slept above in the boughs, wings tucked tight. Her heart stuttered.

She turned her head. “Lysander.”

His eyes snapped open before she finished the word. No startle, just awareness, immediately poised for anything.

Idonea’s fingers brushed the hilt of her dagger. “Something watches.”

Lysander rose silently, crouching low as he stepped over the dying fire, scanning the dark. “How many?”

“I think one,” she whispered. “But it's masking itself.” There was no daemon scent in the air, which was little comfort.

Idonea rummaged through her satchel, hand closing over her salt. She stood, sprinkling salt around them in a circle.

Cold spread through the grove unnaturally fast. Idonea's breath caught white in the air. A shape emerged. Tall and sinuous, a silhouette of smoke. Shadows bent towards them.

Idonea’s voice caught. “Wraith.”

Lysander’s jaw clenched. “Unkillable.”

“They want us to know they’re watching.” She swallowed, eyes locked on the edge of the grove where darkness pulsed. More wraiths likely waited in the gloom. Waiting for a wrong move.

“Well?” Lysander stood beside her.

“We travel away from shadows, the dark,” she said.

The horse whickered, sensing the cold presence of the wraith.

Idonea went over to the gelding, to give it the safety of salt, too. Icy cold slithered through her. A bloodied handprint marked its saddle. She hurriedly sprinkled the salt.

The wraith remained at the perimeter.

They both settled back around the fire, Lysander feeding it more kindling. Flames leaped higher, the light driving the shadows back a pace.

“This is more than we bargained for,” he said.

Her eyes snapped to his. “I’m not giving up.”

“I didn’t say you should,” he said. “But if we go straight to Krylovan, we can get reinforcements.”

Her shoulders went rigid. “I don’t need more of the Order knowing about the relic.”

He looked up. “Even if it costs you your life?”

She couldn’t save Nellith, find the relic, and take on an archduke daemon if there were all these other entities pitted against her. There might have been a chance she could, but Lysander was right, at what sacrifice?

The wraiths hadn’t moved, hovering at the edges of sight.

Idonea kept her gaze on them, jaw tight. “They won’t stop. Not until they have the relic.”

“Or you,” Lysander said. His tone wasn’t cruel. “Either way, we can’t face them alone.”

She turned towards him, firelight catching the strain in her eyes. “If you turn back now, we lose our lead. Every moment wasted gives them more ground. You know that.”

He met her look steadily. “And if you collapse before we find it?” He leaned forward, elbows on his knees, voice low but fierce. “They’ll tear through both of us.”

Her hand tightened around the dagger in her lap. “You think I haven’t considered that?”

Lance shifted in the branches above. His unease pressed faintly against her mind.

“Krylovan’s seven days ride, maybe six if we cut a path.” He gestured towards the shadows. “They won’t linger near so many Templars.”

“They’ll follow,” she said.

“Then make them chase us into a ground of our choosing.” His tone hardened.

The logic of it burned bitterly in her chest. He was right, but the thought of turning away from Nellith’s trail gnawed at her.

She met his eyes again. “We’ll waste no time once we are there?”

“None,” he said. “You have my word.”

She studied him, searching for the smallest hint of hesitation.

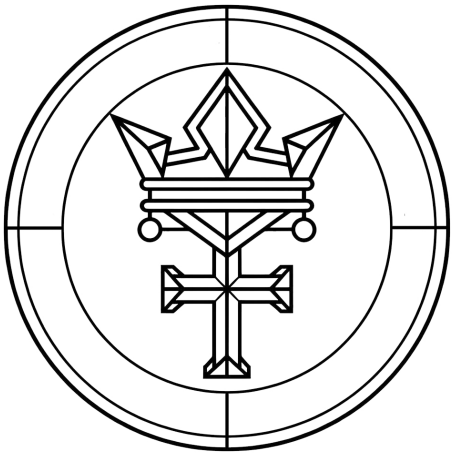
She nodded once, reluctantly. “At first light, then.” The words tasted like defeat.

Lysander exhaled. “Try to rest.”

She drew her cloak tighter, turning back towards the dying fire. “They’ll think we’re running.”

“Then let them.”

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Chapter 12

The sun stayed behind the haze. Mist dragged low across the trail. Cold soaked through her gloves despite the leather. Every breath hurt slightly now.

Lance circled overhead, wings cutting through the fog in wide, deliberate arcs. His usual hisses were gone; only the faint rush of air marked his passing.

Idonea tugged her cloak tighter, every muscle in her body sore from the night before. She looked towards Lysander. He rode with the same controlled stillness he brought to everything. Idonea had stopped expecting his face to reveal useful information.

The land grew harsher with every mile. Pines thickened along the slopes until the road narrowed to a winding trail hemmed by trunks black with frost. The air carried the smell of resin and snow, the sky a constant pale weight pressing above the trees. They rode in silence, Idonea in front, Lysander's arm at her waist.

By the second day, the ground froze hard beneath the gelding’s hooves. Ice sheathed the river that ran parallel to their path, its surface cracking faintly beneath the current. Idonea dismounted to fill her waterskin, kneeling beside the bank.

Lysander crouched nearby. “You’re healing fast.”

“The Current helps,” she said, corking the skin. She’d never understood it completely, but she’d always healed faster than others.

He studied her in silence, but whatever thoughts crossed his mind stayed behind his eyes.

On the third day, snow fell. Light at first, then steadied, until it clung to their cloaks and lashes. The trees loomed close, muffling all sounds, even forcing Lance to fly lower. Idonea was grateful they’d encountered no

Nexis entities so far. She’d stopped the tracking spell, though it gnawed at her not knowing where Nellith was.

When they made camp that night, it was in a clearing ringed by firs, their branches heavy with white. Lysander knelt by the fire, coaxing flame from damp wood. The orange glow cut across his features.

Idonea watched him fit brass plates together, fingers deft despite the cold.

“What is that?” she asked.

He didn’t look up. “An emitter. Templars use them to test for residual Current.”

Her lips thinned. “You carry one while travelling with me?”

“Precaution, not mistrust.”

“You lie well.”

He gave a shrug. “You live longer when you learn to.”

The device ticked faintly, then dimmed. He set it aside, rubbing his thumb along the seam of his mechanical wrist.

Silence stretched. The kind that made her aware of every crackle of fire and every breath they shared in the cold.

After salting a circle, she lay on her blanket and curled up tight, shivering from the cold. Lysander laid his own over the top of her.

Her teeth chattered. “Thanks.”

“Your father would kill me if I let his only daughter freeze,” Lysander said and lay on the damp snow-packed earth beside her.

Only daughter. The words landed wrong. Idonea went still beneath the blanket. *Did he truly not know? Or had something happened to Dyota after she was taken?*

Lance slithered up beside her, putting himself between Lysander and her. Twice in the night she woke to the sensation of cold breath at the nape of her neck. On the second occasion she rose and looked. A wraith stood at the perimeter of her salt ring, its form barely there. It didn't attempt the circle. Idonea hated how human that patience felt. It simply watched until she met its gaze, and then it receded into the dark between the trees.

She didn't sleep again until dawn.

The land changed on the fourth day. The hills rolled uneven beneath the snow, large enough to hide almost anything. Idonea disliked them immediately.

The horse’s breath plumed white in the air. Idonea had learned the rhythm of its gait now, swaying easily with its motion, the ache in her body fading.

They crested a rise, and the land fell away into a vast valley. In the distance, a fjord cut through the mountains. She slipped from the horse to take it in.

Idonea paused, breath catching. For a moment, even she forgot the cold.

Lysander stood beside her, cloak whipping in the wind. “Dangerous,” he said.

She smiled faintly. “Most worthwhile things are.”

Lysander looked at her for a moment too long. Idonea pretended not to notice.

They passed through an abandoned village at dusk. Three stone houses and a chapel, all roofless, their interiors filled with drifts of snow. Idonea dismounted to study the broken doorway of the chapel. Inside, the altar was scorched black, a sigil burned deep into the stone: a spiral of thin lines.

“They were trying to open a veil,” she said.

“Did they succeed?” Lysander moved through the chapel, toeing aside rotten chunks of wood.

She pressed her palm against the sigil, but the stone was cold. No disturbance present within the Current. “No. Not entirely.”

“Well, that’s something.”

Idonea had no urge to linger and returned to the horse.

They descended towards the fjord, snow crunching under hooves. The cold had turned cruel, biting at their faces. When they stopped, Lysander built a fire within a ring of stones, while Idonea wrapped her cloak tighter. Lance perched above them on a rock.

Idonea watched him work. He sat across from the fire with the silver flask in his hand, turning it without opening it. After a long moment he uncorked it and took a careful sip. He caught her watching and corked it without explanation.

"You drink less than I would expect, for a man who carries his own flask."

"I drink what I need to."

"Is that an answer?"

"It is the answer I have."

She let it go. The fire snapped between them, and the conversation died. Outside, the darkness offered nothing but a vast, empty silence.

By the fifth day, the path carved itself along the cliffside, the fjord spread wide below them as the wind howled up from the chasm. The horse stumbled once on the ice-slick stones, and Lysander’s arm shot forward, steadying Idonea without thought.

“You’re shaking,” he said.

“I’m cold,” she replied.

He adjusted his cloak, then shifted forward so his chest shielded her back. She stiffened at first, then said nothing. The warmth helped.

That night, the stars returned. They camped beneath an open sky. Lysander sat with his back to a rock, his sword resting across his knees.

Idonea watched the stars a long while before speaking. “Do you believe in fate?”

He looked over. “I believe a man can decide what he does.”

“Even bad ones?”

“Especially bad ones.”

She smiled faintly. “That’s convenient.”

“For you?”

“For both of us.”

They came down off the ridge in the last of the light on the sixth day, and Krylovan rose out of the valley below them. Snow had been falling constantly, fine as dust on the saddle, building soft white shelves along the gelding's mane. For a moment she wanted to turn back.

She had expected something larger. The village was a knot of low stone buildings, each one's chimney pouring smoke in a slow steady column into the pale sky. A waist-high stone fence ran around the whole settlement, half-eaten by moss; a fence that had stopped being a boundary a long time ago and was now just a shape the land remembered.

A Templar stood guard as they neared the stone stables, which sat at the front of the town. He wore a fur cloak that reached his ankles, his gloved hands rested easily near his mace. Lance took to the skies.

“Brother,” Lysander said. “Will you let Exemplar Alcaeus know of our arrival?”

“Of course,” the Templar said, his gaze remaining on Idonea as he said it.

Idonea’s nose would freeze soon if she didn’t get out of this cold.

Lysander held out his arm and each of them gripped the other’s elbow. “My thanks.”

With a nod from each other, Lysander gestured for her to follow. She rubbed her arms up and down to keep them warm. No one was on the lane. The gas lamps were lit but lit for no one. The village held the same heavy presence as an occupied crypt. Quiet, but not empty. The cobbles were buried under enough snow that the gelding's hooves made no sound. A stone fountain sat dry in the centre of the square. Around it, terraces of two-storey narrow brick loomed. North of the fountain stood a larger house and beside it, smaller, a cottage. To the right of the square, a hall and a chapel sat with their backs to each other, as if pretending the other one wasn't there.

She looked at it all and her chest got cold.

Two girls in heavy field-coats crossed the square ahead of them, carrying a wooden case between them. The case was the size of a small chest, banded in copper. Both of them carried the copper-banded case with rigid care. Like something inside might wake if jostled. Both pairs of hands were stained dark to the wrist.

Lysander didn't comment. Idonea didn't ask.

He led Idonea into the one-storey house next to the two-storey. A hearth burned at the end of the front room, with a round table positioned nearby. It served a dual purpose of kitchen and dining. Only two doors led off the first room. One into the bathroom, and the other the bedroom. Thick embroidered tapestries hung on the walls, trapping in the heat.

“Am I to stay here alone?” Idonea asked.

“This was mine,” Lysander said. “Now, I’ll lodge with your father. The plan was to always give you a private space.”

“Not afraid of what I’ll do?”

“No.” He pointed at the front door, which was the same blue-black metal as the cuffs, Lodamante. The chill permeating her body must’ve overridden the sensation of losing access to the Current.

She swallowed hard. “Are all houses like that?”

Lysander nodded. “Krylovan is predominantly a community of witches,” he said. “You’ll be fine.”

But he didn’t mean Riven like her, but Resonants. Witches the order tolerated, and controlled.

He bundled up his own belongings and left her alone.

A metal bar clanged from outside the front door. Trying to open it would be futile. She'd walked right into a larger cage. She went to a nearby window, and thought it would open, but it was useless. Lodamante bars criss-crossed over them. Lance wouldn't be able to fit through. She stared at the hearth until her vision blurred, then she shut the curtains, trapping what heat she could.

The bed was a four-poster draped in brocade, but there were no spare clothes, no food. She pressed her hand to the front door. The Lodamante throbbed against her skin like a living thing.

Idonea curled her fingers into a fist and stepped back. She would not, she thought, sleep yet.

She pivoted in the centre of the cottage. The Lodamante in the walls dampened the Current; she couldn't reach for it the way she would've at home. But she still had eyes and hands. Her father had been in Krylovan longer than anyone. He had been married to a woman who hid things. If anything of her mother's had ever moved through this village, some piece of it might have stayed.

She started with the bed. The mattress was thin, and the frame was plain. Nothing under it, or in it. The pillow held only its straw. She lifted the rug at her feet and found nothing beneath but stone. She opened the chest at the bed's foot and found bed linen, folded clean, and nothing else. Her fingertips raked along the back of the inside wall, chasing the desperate hope of a false panel. There was none.

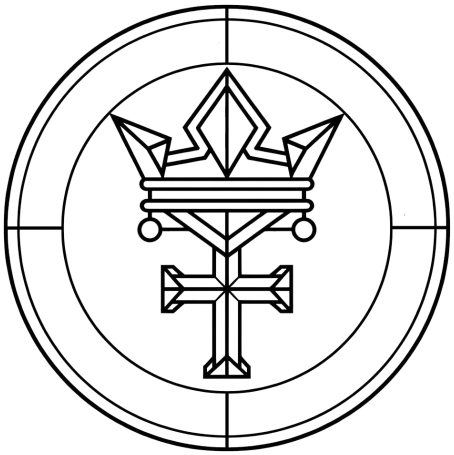
She moved to the shelves. Books in three categories: Templar liturgy, the kind any cottage of this kind would have; a few practical volumes on cold-climate husbandry; one slim devotional in a hand she didn't know. She opened each, fanned the pages, looked for marginalia. There was no marginalia. There was nothing pressed between any of the leaves. The books had been read by no one who cared.

A cursory glance in the cupboards showed nothing of immediate interest. Her mother's traces were not here. They were probably not in this village at all. But she would have to keep looking, and she'd start by knowing what she'd already excluded.

She sat at the table at last and let her hands rest on the wood.

"I hope you didn't lie to me," she whispered to the empty house.

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Chapter 13

Idonea was sinking into the claw-foot tub when the front door groaned open.

She surged from the water, limbs scrambling. She yanked a towel tight around her torso, heart pounding. Her hands fumbled for her glasses, smearing the lenses as she jammed them onto her face.

Lysander strode in, eyebrows rising at her appearance.

Heat slammed into her face. *Wonderful*. Lysander looked entirely unbothered. *Naturally*.

He held out a folded bundle. “Clothes. For you.”

Lysander wore a black wool shirt beneath a fur-lined vest, his cloak still dusted with snow.

“Leave them on the bed,” she said. “And, thank you.”

“After you’re dressed, your father wants a word.”

She raised an eyebrow, water dripping from her hair to the floor. “Are you going to stand there?”

He smirked and turned. “I’ll wait outside.”

The door clicked shut behind him.

The clothes were warmer than anything she’d worn: a tan wool dress that brushed her ankles, black blouse, leather underbust corset. Stockings, gloves, scarf, and cloak. If they didn’t keep her warm, she wasn’t meant for this place. Draugaros never saw snow.

Outside, Lysander leaned against the stone wall. He straightened when she emerged, gaze lingering a beat too long. Across the square, Templars watched from their posts. She followed him without a word. The door to the two-storey house creaked open under his hand.

He stepped aside. “He’s waiting for you.”

She stepped over the threshold and Lysander shut the door behind her. The scent of vanilla filled the air. In the increased warmth, Idonea shrugged

off the cloak.

Alcaeus sat by the fire in a high-backed armchair. “I trust you slept.”

Idonea ignored the pleasantry, lowering herself into the seat opposite. “You know I’m not staying long.”

He shook his head. “Lysander made the right call. It is for your own benefit.”

Idonea’s laugh came sharp. “That’s what you said when you left.” Her voice trembled once. “When you took little Dyota.”

He cleared his throat.

She pressed on. “Where is she now, Alcaeus? What happened to my younger sister?”

“I thought you wouldn’t ask.”

“Of course you did.” She rose from her chair. “She was only five. And you took her. From her mother. From *me*.”

“Dyota had a better chance with me,” he said.

“Don’t.” Her voice cracked. “Don’t feed me that.”

"Your mother—" He stopped. His jaw worked. "Nellith and I disagreed on many things."

Idonea sucked in a breath. "What things?"

"It doesn't matter—"

"It matters." Her voice was very level. "I have been looking for her. I have come into your village at a Severant's offer because the only thing in the world I want to know is where she is and what was happening to her, and that relic. So what things, Alcaeus. Be specific."

He turned away from her. He stood at the mantel with his back to her.

"She had begun to talk about vessels," he said. "About workings I didn't recognise. I asked her where she was reading, and she wouldn't tell me. I asked her what the workings were for, and she wouldn't tell me. Toward the end she'd taken to writing in a hand small enough that no one but herself could read it. I asked her once if I should be afraid. She said—" his jaw worked again "—she said only an unprepared husband had any reason to be."

"What does that mean?"

"I don't know, Idonea. I have never known. I have spent fifteen years not knowing. I took Dyota because she was the younger and she was the one your mother hadn't been with the most in those last months. That is what I had. I didn't have anything else."

There was a long silence.

"It doesn't matter now." He averted his eyes. “Dyota had to be sent to the Radiant Reformation College.”

The words landed like a blow. “What?”

He stood from his chair. “I made the choice that kept her alive longest.” He walked over to the mantelpiece above the fireplace. “The corruption within her needed to be cleansed.”

Idonea’s hand slammed against the headrest. “You sent her there?” Nausea rolled hard through her stomach. She’d only heard whispers of it. A tower where the Republic locked up witches to convert them, change their path.

He lifted his head, eyes hollow. “I tried to save her. You must know I tried.”

“You handed her to them and called it mercy."

“I took her from Nellith so she’d live.” His fingers tightened on the edge of the mantel.

“You took her from the only people who would’ve *loved* her.”

Alcaeus drew in a sharp breath, then reached for a frame on the mantel. His hand trembled as he turned it towards her. “She’s been gone for three years now.”

The firelight brushed over the glass. Idonea forgot to breathe. Dyota’s face stared out, dark hair tangled and eyes bright. Older, but still Dyota.

Idonea’s hand rose, hesitant, then she took the frame. Her thumb brushed the edge. “She looks just like—” The word *me* caught in her throat.

Her eyes burned. “Did she remember me?”

He closed his eyes and shook his head.

Her voice shrank to a whisper. “Never asked for me?”

Another shake of his head. Idonea looked down immediately. Her vision blurred. *Humiliating*.

She held the frame to her chest, breath quivering.

“When I heard a witch with your name had been taken into custody…” His voice frayed. “I wanted it to be you. So I could save you.”

Idonea looked up, and she pitied him. “I don’t need saving,” she said. The words came out rough. “You forfeited that right when you gave her away.”

His shoulders sagged. “Going after this relic is a dark path.”

“Maybe.” Her gaze hardened. “But at least it’s *mine*. You don’t get to decide that anymore.”

A knock interrupted them. Lysander opened the door to a wiry man in a Templar-grey field coat, stained dark at the cuffs.

"Brother Alcaeus. The Magistrate says the south rows aren't taking. Three of the older girls have tried, and the roots won't open. He thinks the soil's gone."

Alcaeus didn't look away from Idonea. "Has he tested it?"

"Twice."

"Then it's gone. Move the rotation north and start a new south plot next spring."

"He wants permission to put Arina on the north rows. He says she's strong enough."

A silence.

"Arina's seventeen. She's not due to start those fields for another year."

"Yes, sir. But the Magistrate says—"

"Tell him that Arina starts when I say she starts. Not when his quota slips."

The man hesitated, nodded, left.

Alcaeus didn't speak.

Idonea watched him. "You're protecting her."

"Everyone here reaches the fields eventually." His pen didn't stop. "I only decide how young they are when it happens. I run a farm under Templar oversight, Idonea. Every choice I make sends someone towards something that will eventually shorten their life. I get to pick the order. I don't get to change the destination."

She shook her head, spun on her heel, snatched up the cloak, and stormed out of the room, the frame still clutched close to her heart. She pushed the front door open.

The cold night hit her like a wall. The frame was still clutched in her hands when she reached her quarters. She sank into the nearest chair, the fire gone from her, only the emptiness left behind.

The image of Dyota stared back from the frame, smile frozen in another time. Idonea traced a fingertip down the glass, then rested her forehead against it.

For the first time in years, she let the silence close in around her and didn’t fight it.

“I’m sorry for what he did to you, Dyota,” she said, putting her head in her hands, letting the tears fall.

She didn’t hear anyone enter. Not over the dull roar in her head, or the broken sound that eluded her when she tried to breathe.

“I never knew he'd another daughter.”

The voice pulled her upright. Lysander stood in the doorway, one hand braced against the frame.

Idonea scrubbed hard at her face. *Too late*. Lysander had already seen enough.

Her throat burned. “He’s a liar.”

Lysander didn’t move closer. He studied her, his expression guarded.

“You should come meet some of the other witches,” he said at last.

She drew a deep, unsteady breath, forcing it through clenched teeth. The tears had dried into salt trails along her skin. “I’m not staying.”

He didn’t answer right away.

Her gaze met his. “You promised,” she said.

“I remember.” His jaw worked once before he added, “It will take a couple of days to get it all organised.”

“Then why bother,” she said. “They won’t like me.”

Her fingers tightened around the picture frame in her lap, knuckles whitening.

“They don’t know you,” he said.

Her head tilted, a bitter smile tugging at her mouth. “Neither do you.”

Lysander shifted his weight. His hand dropped from the doorframe. “Come.”

Back outside, near the fountain, townspeople walked. None looked older than twenty.

A few walked towards them, and one girl with pale skin caught her eye. Her hair was shocking white, and she'd wide green eyes. She wore similar attire to the other females around: a simple dark brown, long gathered skirt, a brown brocade overbust corset, white woollen blouse; with a dark brown hooded fur coat that fell to the ground. All the females sported short hair, not a strand falling past their ears.

She was the first to step forward and extend her hand out to Idonea.

“Kitsa,” she said in a high-pitched voice. Her eyes strayed to Lysander at her side, and something flashed through her eyes. Kitsa smiled too quickly. Like enthusiasm had become a rehearsed survival skill.

“Idonea,” she said and took her hand, which was garbed in woollen fingerless gloves.

The other two also introduced themselves, twins based on their similar appearances. Edik, the boy, had one green and one brown eye, while the girl’s eyes were both brown. The twins didn’t look Idonea in the eye, and after shuffling from foot to foot, they turned and headed towards the chapel. The girl stole a backwards glance. A sliver of amber streaked through her eyes. Something about it tugged at Idonea’s memory.

Kitsa stayed and took a step forward, bouncing on the balls of her feet.

“Can show you around,” she said. Her arms swung at her sides.

Lysander shook his head. “You know the rules Kitsa,” he said. “You’ve got to join the others.”

She looked between Lysander and Idonea, then pouted. “But a witch.”

“She’s older, and you’ve got somewhere to be.” He pointed at the chapel.

While those two glared at each other, Idonea’s eyes wandered up to the grey-blue sky with hints of pink. Lance darted from tree to tree, keeping away from the others. The fewer who knew a dragonkin was alive, the better.

Eventually Kitsa gave in and sprinted to the chapel, her boots crunching over the snow.

“Is there something I should know?” Idonea asked.

Lysander sighed. “No. I should get you acquainted with the town.”

"I have a thought — fetch a map. We should plan where we go next."

His left hand flexed.

“No?” She licked her lips. “Sitting idle is not why I am here.”

“Come along,” he said, “before I change my mind.”

He walked towards the long hall and chapel. Snow lightly covered the roofs, and nearby barren trees gleamed white in their snow coatings.

“The hall is where town meetings happen, as well as group lunches,” he said. “The chapel is where our witches learn about Dawn’s path.”

“And they are all Resonants?” She examined the chapel. Its entry was arched, and stained-glass windows stood beside the doors. The stone construction appeared aged, as if the town was built around it.

He nodded. “Of course.”

“Under careful watch,” she said.

“Even light can become shadow.”

Idonea rolled her eyes and walked at Lysander’s side as he headed behind the chapel. A cemetery stood behind it, a rusted iron fence gated it. Lysander reached to open the gate.

“Don’t,” she said, grabbing his arm, “you’ll disrespect the Guardian.”

“A superstition.” He drew his hand away and glanced down at hers; it was on his mechanical one.

She withdrew it. “A truth.”

“Very well, we will not walk through there,” he said.

They moved on, the hush of snow swallowing their footsteps.

A southern path branched off near the trees behind the chapel. A simple gate, rusted at the hinges. Two girls in field-coats were passing through it, one of them carrying a bundle of cloth that smelled faintly of something Idonea couldn't place. They didn't look at them.

A branch cracked ahead. Out from behind a tree stepped a woman with short blonde hair, her cheeks wind-chapped, her breath white in the cold. She wore a dark-green wool coat trimmed in fur, brass buckles catching what little light filtered through the trees. A quiver hung across her back beside a string of dead hares, and she held a bow loosely in one hand, its string taut and gleaming.

“Elzhbeta,” Lysander greeted. “This is Idonea, Brother Alcaeus’ daughter.”

The woman’s eyes, near-black, studied Idonea. A faint line appeared between her brows before she smiled.

“A witch, I see.” Her voice was soft, her tone amused.

Lysander’s tone remained even. “Hunting?”

Elzhbeta’s smile didn’t reach her eyes. “You could say that.” She adjusted the strap of her quiver, and a charm glinted at her wrist. “A fox escaped my grasp, though.”

Idonea frowned. “A fox? Hard hunt in this cold.”

Elzhbeta’s smile was faint. “Foxes survive because people mistake caution for cowardice.”

Lysander’s eyes flicked to her. “Tomorrow, then.”

The woman’s attention slid from him back to Idonea. Then she turned away, her boots crunching through the snow.

Idonea exhaled. “She is no witch.”

Lysander shook his head. “No, Elzhbeta is wedded to the Magistrate. She also hunts game for the town.”

“Useful to know.” Idonea pointed in the direction she came from. “Where does that lead?”

“Towards the fjord.”

She gave him a sideways glance. “A curious place to cage witches.”

Lysander kept walking, boots grinding over the packed snow.

“Do you ever take your arm off?” she asked, matching his pace.

“Of course,” he said. “When I sleep.”

“Oh.” She paused and took in his appearance, wondering how he’d lost it. “I thought you never slept.”

He shot her a disarming smile. “I could say the same of you.”

She pointed at herself. “Riven.”

He gave no reply, only turned down a narrow, snow-covered path that led away from the stables.

“Where does this lead?” she asked.

“You’ll see.”

They followed the trail downhill. The trees opened into a clearing where the river curved, half-frozen and sluggish beneath a sheet of ice. The sound of running water whispered beneath it, low and constant. A gazebo stood nearby, its wooden roof bowed beneath a heavy quilt of snow.

Lysander went straight to it, brushing snow from the stone bench before sitting. Idonea waited by the riverbank, tugging off one glove and dipping her fingers into the icy water. It burned with cold.

“Don’t fall in,” he called.

Idonea straightened and brushed snow from her skirt’s hem. “How many do you hope will join us?”

“That’s for your father to decide,” he said.

She moved towards the gazebo, her gaze catching on a lone oak nearby. Ancient, incongruous among the firs, its bark dark with frost. Something about it was wrong, too alive. She shook the thought away and sat beside him, careful to leave a space between them.

“The longer we delay, the higher the risk the daemons get what they want.” She left it unsaid that the longer they waited, the likelihood of finding Nellith unharmed, diminished.

He turned his head towards her. “We can’t rush this. Preparation keeps people alive.”

“I’m not under his command,” she said, jaw tightening.

“You’re under mine.”

Her eyes snapped to him. He only met her gaze, calm as ever.

“I gave you my word, Idonea.”

Her smile was brittle. “And your word bends with the chain of command?”

Something flickered in his expression, gone before she could name it. He shifted closer, not enough to touch, but close enough his warmth reached her.

Lance flew towards them and circled Lysander’s head. He gave three short hisses and shot back away.

“Should we follow him?” Lysander asked.

Lance darted in and around the river. “Ignore him. He’s making his opinions known.”

Lysander’s lips curved faintly. “Are you ever afraid of the Iaculus?”

“No,” she said. “He knows one of his own blood. He’d not harm me. He knows I’ll keep him safe.”

Lysander stood from the bench. “We should head back. Your father will expect you at the meal.”

“I’d rather freeze in the river.”

“I’m sure he wouldn’t want you to do that.” Lysander stepped towards her, offering his hand.

She looked at it but didn’t take it. “Why aren’t you afraid of what I could do?”

“You would've killed me by now if you wanted to.” He took a step closer, eyes steady. “You wouldn't hurt me for no reason.”

Her pulse quickened. “Many would say otherwise.”

Lance skimmed over the top of the river.

“Maybe, but I’m a better judge of character.”

He gestured in front of him and let her go first up the trail. She glanced over her shoulder once, catching him watching her with that same unreadable calm.

“Besides,” he said, “you wouldn’t know what to do without me, witchling.”

She snorted. “I wouldn’t be so certain.” But she looked back again.

They returned in time for the midday meal.

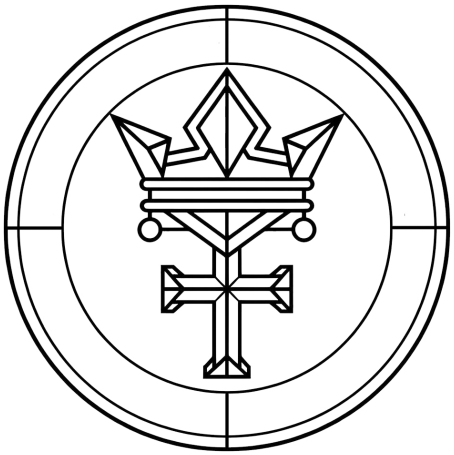
Alcaeus and Idonea sat across from each other in brittle silence, speaking only when duty demanded. When he asked how her day had been, she told him to rot.

Before she left, Alcaeus rose and addressed the hall. His voice carried easily, heavy with command.

“As most of you're aware, tonight begins our biggest test,” he said. “For darkness will engulf us. The dawn will not rise, and the horizon will swallow the sun. It is during this time you will be tested.” He looked at Idonea and she swallowed. “Tested to see if you can avoid the dark’s call and stay with the light, even when none can be found.”

A sudden cold plunged through the hall. No dawn. Idonea's stomach tightened. Nexis entities moved easiest in true dark.

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Chapter 14

When the gathering dispersed, Idonea slipped outside into the cold. Snow caught in her lashes and melted cold against her skin. She stood beneath the eaves, listening to the muffled sounds from within the hall: chairs scraping, the low rise of voices, the scrape of steel.

Frost webbed across the abandoned fountain. Idonea stared at it longer than necessary. Anything to delay going back inside.

"Thought you'd disappeared," came a voice behind her.

Lysander. He moved quietly, always too quietly.

"Would it matter if I had?" she asked without turning.

He came to stand beside her, far enough to give her space. "Your father would notice."

"My father—" she stopped herself. "He doesn't worry."

Lysander didn't answer.

She exhaled. "Do you believe him? About the test?"

He took his time before answering. "I believe darkness finds its way in, no matter what name we give it."

She turned to him then. "I don't trust this place."

"I wouldn't expect you to."

Her lips twitched at that.

He looked towards the horizon. "You should head inside."

She pulled her cloak tighter. "I will, soon."

Lysander went back towards the hall.

Idonea scanned the nearby buildings. There had to be salt, the town couldn't run without it. Salt preserved meat, cleared paths, warded homes. Salt was sacred, and she only had a little left in her belt.

A few Templars stood guard stiffly, eerily silent, their lamplight halos throwing long shadows across the square. None looked inclined to help her.

"Can I help, dear?"

Idonea startled, turning to her left. A middle-aged woman stood at her side. The tight bun emphasised her hard jawline and high cheekbones.

“Oh,” she said, her eyes brightening. “You must be Brother Alcaeus’ daughter.” She smiled. “I’m Lidiya. I didn’t mean to frighten you.” A brown birthmark streaked under her left eye.

“It’s okay,” Idonea said. “I’m after some salt.”

“Really?” Lidiya asked. Idonea nodded. “Of course. Just stay right there. I’ll fetch some for you right now.” She gave a nod and then scurried off.

Although tempted to follow, Idonea paced in a circle under the Templars’ gaze while she waited. Lance landed silently on a nearby eave, his reptilian body tense.

It didn’t take long for Lidiya to return, a pouch held in her left hand.

She held it out to Idonea. “Will this be sufficient?”

Idonea weighed it in her palm. It wasn’t enough to ward the whole town, but it would have to do. “Thank you.”

Lidiya beamed. “Glad to help.” She then left once more.

Idonea worked fast. Snow crackled beneath her steps as she salted a ring around her cottage. The grains glittered like stars against the snow. Above, Lance perched on the roof, a still shadow watching her every movement.

She glanced at the two-storey house beside hers. Alcaeus’ residence. Her jaw tightened. Then, without looking at his windows, she poured salt along its perimeter. Not for him, never for him.

For Lysander. For necessity.

They were both right. She’d need help to stop Vinea — and who better than a Daemonbreaker.

As dusk deepened, she carried the last of the salt to the stables. Horses shifted restlessly in their stalls, breath steaming in the chill. She couldn’t bear the thought of them being slaughtered. Her hands trembled as she scattered the final lines. Moonlight pooled in the snow at her feet, painting her a slender shadow.

A scream cut through the night, high and feminine, raw enough to scrape against her bones. The hush shattered around it like glass.

The horses reared in their stalls, hooves striking wood. Frost rattled loose from the rafters.

Lance shot up into the air with a shriek.

The crunch of boots against snow cut through the stillness. Lysander emerged from the dark, a wavering lamplight held high. He moved fast, and skidded to a halt a few paces from her, breath fogging in short bursts.

“Why are you here?” His voice was low as he advanced a step, the light shifting across his face, grim lines sharpened by exhaustion.

“Not running,” she said. Her voice was steady, but her hands betrayed her, still trembling from the echo of the scream.

The salt circle at her feet gleamed faintly, but it wasn't enough.

Lysander’s gaze dropped to it. His jaw flexed. “Come then,” he said, turning away. “Your father demands your presence.”

She tucked the empty salt pouch into her belt. “What was that scream?”

He didn’t slow, didn’t meet her gaze. “You’ll see, witchling.”

The words hung between them, heavy.

A group gathered in the space near the chapel. Alcaeus stood with Elzhbeta. Another man, with pale eyes and silver-threaded black hair, stood by her side, who Idonea assumed must’ve been the Magistrate.

When Alcaeus noticed Idonea’s approach, he walked over and gripped her upper arm, pulling her to where the others stood.

“What did you do?” He pushed her forward, and she stumbled right over the body.

It was the girl, Edik’s twin.

Idonea shuddered. She smelled the daemon scent first. The blood took another second to register. The girl’s throat a wide open gash. Five ragged slashes bloomed across her chest while crimson blood pooled around her head and soaked into the snow.

“It wasn’t me,” she choked out. Her head spun. The girl’s body was mutilated the same way as the boy’s on the airship. “I’m not even bleeding.”

“Then explain *this*.” Alcaeus jabbed his finger towards her feet.

She stepped gingerly around the body, her knees trembling, her stomach churning. Bile burned in the back of her throat.

A daemon sigil. Burned into the frozen earth, seared with the dark, oily blackness of the Nexis, writhing still at the edges. Her vision blurred. It was the same as the one at Nellith’s house. The same lines. Vinea.

“You recognise it,” he said, his voice unnervingly muted, “don’t you.”

Her mouth tasted like ash. She swallowed, but it did nothing. “You know why this has happened.”

Alcaeus' eyes narrowed.

Elzhbeta spoke up. "You would accuse your own daughter?"

Idonea turned to her. Elzhbeta stood untouched by the weather. Even the snow seemed careful around her.

The Magistrate stepped forward. "The day after she arrives," he said flatly, "we have a dead witch."

Elzhbeta's dark eyes flicked to the sigil. Idonea wrapped her arms around herself.

"I'd never kill one of my own," she whispered. The words barely left her throat.

She stepped back, snow crunching beneath her boots. Her skin crawled and the accusation settled in the pit of her stomach. No one answered her.

Elzhbeta's eyes watched her a moment too long. The Magistrate folded his hands behind his back. Even Lysander avoided her gaze, his jaw was clenched tight, his shoulders locked.

Something cracked in her then, like frost breaking underfoot. She stood alone among people who were practically strangers.

"Let me find it," she said. "Let me end it."

Alcaeus let out a heavy breath. "Lysander," he said, "take her away. Keep her locked away until I summon her."

"What?" She took another step back. "No."

The Magistrate gave a nod to Alcaeus and led Elzhbeta away.

Lysander stepped towards her. His eyes didn't meet hers as he reached for her dagger, and she got it first. Her fingers tightened around the hilt.

"Don't," she said, her voice breaking. "You know this isn't right."

He said nothing. Only the faint sound of leather and steel as his fingers brushed hers, and then the weight of the dagger left her hand.

Alcaeus held out his hand, palm open like a command. "Give it to me."

Idonea's fists clenched. Her whole body trembled. "I'd be careful."

Alcaeus barely glanced at her. "The dagger, Brother."

Lysander hesitated, then placed it in her father's outstretched hand.

Alcaeus turned, and without pause, slammed the blade into the chapel wall. Wood split, metal ground.

Idonea's breath hitched.

He wrenched the handle. A sharp crack split the air as the hilt tore free, leaving the blade jutting from the wood. Nellith had given her that dagger.

She surged forward, but Lysander caught her. His arm locked around hers.

“Idonea,” he murmured.

Heat tore suddenly through her veins. Her nails sharpened painfully. Current flooded beneath her skin hard enough to ache.

Alcaeus’ eyes found hers, then down to her equipment. “Take those as well,” he said.

“Don’t touch me.” Her voice rose to a growl.

Above, Lance surged into the sky. She turned her head, searching for him, but he didn’t come down. He circled high above, out of reach.

“I hate you.” She spat at Alcaeus’ feet.

Alcaeus adjusted his coat as though nothing had happened. “Have restraint.”

Lysander dragged her away, his grip firm, but shaking. He didn’t look at her. She didn’t fight him; she stopped feeling her legs halfway to the cottage.

He guided her inside, his hand around her waist like he was holding a marionette. She couldn’t feel her legs anymore and her thoughts were noise.

The cottage was cramped and cold. Just like a prison cell.

Lysander’s hand lingered at her waist a moment too long, steadying her. He sat her on the bed and stepped back. She slid down from the edge, the weight of her own body too much to bear. Her knees hit the floorboards with a hollow thud. She folded in on herself, pressing her forehead to her arms. The floor was cold, grounding her.

Lysander stood near the bedroom doorway. “I’m sorry about your dagger.”

Idonea glared up at him through a blur of lashes and tears. “No, you aren’t.” She licked her lips and tasted the salty tears. “You gave it to him.”

“Witchling…”

“Don’t call me that,” she said. “Just — get out.” The air caught in her chest. “Please.”

He stood there a heartbeat longer. His hand curled at his side.

She didn’t want him there.

She didn’t want him to leave.

He turned, the sound of his boots was soft. The door closed, and the bar clanged down, locking her in. Idonea heard, faintly through the wood, the

soft click of metal — the flask, uncorked. A pause and then the faint scrape of it being put away.

Idonea stayed where she was, arms wrapped tightly around her ribs. A terrible loneliness seeped in, slow and suffocating. She pressed her fingers against her collarbone, tracing the faint stars inked there.

Idonea retrieved the paper from Nellith's book. Its edges were a little ragged from the travel. She ran her finger over the illustration of the heart, over the words. Hoping they'd make sense. Hoping she hadn't missed something.

She paced around, then paused before the mantel. A jar rested there that hadn't been there in her initial search. A quick peek inside and she found more salt. She assumed Lidiya must have brought more for her after handing the pouch over.

A knock rattled the door.

She stood and approached, pressing an ear to the cool metal. There was a pressure beyond the door, something that didn't breathe, didn't shuffle its feet. Just watched.

A wraith. Had her salt circle been disrupted?

A faint hiss drew her to the window. Lance.

She crouched beside it and pulled back the curtain an inch. He perched on a chimney, eyes glowing dimly in the gloom. He chuffed once, a slow warning.

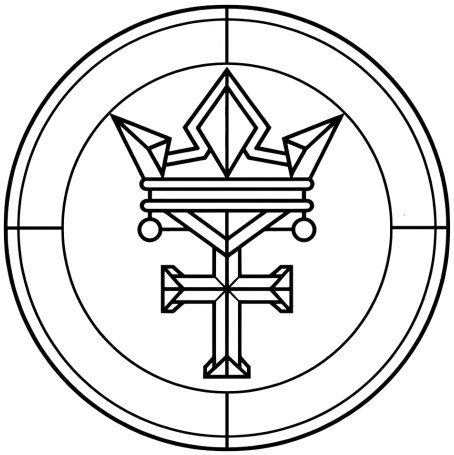
She whispered, "You sense it too, don't you?"

He didn't move. Only stared towards the forest. Towards the chapel and graveyard.

Was it more than a wraith?

She tried to sleep in the bed, but couldn't.

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Chapter 15

Something woke her.

Idonea's eyes snapped open, her hand already closing around the needle she'd tucked beneath her pillow. Her heart slammed against her ribs as she lay perfectly still, straining to listen past the wind whispering in the eaves and the low creak of beams settling in the cold.

Sleep had come badly. Every time she drifted off, something in her body jerked her awake again.

A soft thump from the front room.

Someone is inside.

"Witch?" came a whisper from the dark. "Don't kill me."

Idonea's breath rushed out of her, relief and irritation tangling behind her ribs. She set the needle back on the bedside table with a soft clink, though her pulse refused to slow.

"*Kitsa*." The name came out sharp.

"Please don't be cross." Kitsa's voice trembled, pleading.

Idonea pushed herself upright, swinging her legs over the edge of the bed. The cold floorboards bit at her bare feet as she fumbled for her glasses on the bedside table. They settled crookedly on her nose as the room sharpened around the edges.

She crossed to the front room, lifting the lamp from its hook. Warm light bloomed outward, chasing the shadows back.

Kitsa stood in the centre of the rug, snow still clinging to her white hair, her cloak clutched around her with both fists. The rug had been pulled crooked behind her, and at her feet—

A hatch. Set into the floor of her own cottage, standing open.

"There's a hatch." Her voice came out flat with disbelief.

Kitsa wouldn't meet her eyes. "Yes."

"In my floor."

"Yes."

"To *where*?" Idonea took a step closer, the lamp swinging in her grip, casting wild shadows across the walls.

Kitsa hesitated, her gaze fixed on the toes of her boots. She looked exhausted suddenly, too young for the shadows beneath her eyes.

"There's a passage," she whispered. "Just the one. It links your father's house to here. He lets me into his rooms sometimes, when the other witches are unwell and need attending but not enough to be sent to the hospice. I've come and gone that way before." Her voice grew smaller. "I knew the hatch was here."

Idonea's pulse hammered against her ribs. A passage to Alcaeus's house.

"You came through my father's house?"

Kitsa nodded miserably. "I let myself in. The side door is loose. He's never said anything about it."

"*Kitsa*."

"I know." Her green eyes lifted, wide and luminous in the lamplight. "I should not say all that aloud. I shouldn't have come tonight either. But I needed to, and the lane was watched, and the older witches taught me to use what was given."

"You came here tonight." Idonea's voice sharpened. "In the middle of the night, knowing there's a daemon out there that just murdered a witch on the chapel steps."

"Yes." Kitsa's voice barely carried. There was no fear in it, which was worse. "That's why I came underneath."

Kitsa swayed again. Idonea exhaled sharply through her nose.

"Close the hatch," she said, gentler now. "And get away from the doorway. You look like you're going to faint."

Kitsa pulled the rug back over the hatch with one foot. She didn't move from her spot, exactly. She swayed once, caught herself on the table's edge, and lowered herself into the chair beside it with the careful grace of someone whose legs were no longer entirely trustworthy.

The fire had been banked low for the night. Idonea crouched in front of it, stirring the embers with the poker until they brightened, and added two splits of pine from the basket. The flames caught with a hiss, the resin in the wood waking up. She swung the kettle over the heat.

"Your hands are blue," she said over her shoulder.

"My hands are fine."

"Your *lips* are blue, Kitsa."

A pause. "My hands are also a little blue."

"Come over here."

Kitsa came and sat on the stool by the fire. Idonea took the girl's hands between her own and held them. They were not warm, not even close. The Current would've fixed this instantly. Instead, Idonea sat there rubbing warmth into her skin like an ordinary person.

It took longer than she liked. After a while the blue went out of the girl's fingers and her lips pinked again, and she did not, blessedly, say anything about it.

"I hate this cottage," Idonea muttered.

"I know."

"It's like wearing a hood that no one will let you take off."

"All the cottages are like that."

Idonea let the girl's hands go and rolled her shoulders against the ache that had settled there. She busied herself with the tea, grateful for the ritual of it. She warmed the pot first with a splash of hot water, swirled it, tipped the water out. The leaves went in next. She poured the boiling water in, watching the leaves lift and turn, and set the lid on with care. It was the way Nellith had taught her when she was young. The first thing her mother had ever taught her, she sometimes thought, that wasn't magic.

Her throat tightened around the memory. She forced it down.

"So, why are you here?" she asked.

"I had to come."

"*Kitsa.*"

"Don't."

Idonea didn't push. The word had come out broken at the edges, and she knew that tone, knew it from her own mouth, from a hundred conversations she hadn't been able to bear having.

She left the pot to steep and went to the front door instead. The salt line she'd laid along the threshold that evening was scuffed in two places where Kitsa's feet must have crossed the floor above. The Lodamante had eaten the salt's edges into a fine grey dust where the line had been laid against the iron-veined wood.

She took the salt jar from the mantel and knelt to mend the line.

"It won't do anything," Kitsa said behind her.

"I know."

"Not without the Current."

"I know, Kitsa."

"Then why—"

"Because my mother laid salt across every threshold once a month. I don't remember why."

"Does it help?"

"No." She kept pouring.

When she came back to the table, the tea was ready. The fragrant steam curled upward, soft and sweet. She poured for both of them.

Kitsa wrapped both hands around her cup and held it a long while before drinking.

"Again, why tonight Kitsa?"

Kitsa looked down at her hands.

"Why are you here, Kitsa?"

Kitsa looked down at her hands.

"Because of Edik."

Idonea went still. "What about him?"

"He will not speak. He sat by the hearth in the hall after they took her body and he has not moved since. I tried to bring him a blanket. He wouldn't look at me." Kitsa's voice grew smaller. "Arina was all the family he'd left."

"I am sorry."

"I am afraid for him." Kitsa lifted her eyes. They were very green, and very young. "He is the only warlock in the hall. He has always been quiet. But this is different. He is — he is somewhere I cannot reach. I am afraid he will do something foolish."

"Such as?"

"I don't know. Run. Try to find what killed her. The Templars have told us nothing, but he was there when they pulled her out of the snow. He saw the wounds."

Idonea's pulse sharpened. *He saw.* Of course he had. Edik would've been one of the first witches to reach Arina's body. The Templars could lie to the others in the morning, but they couldn't lie to the warlock who'd already seen.

"What do you want me to do?"

"Nothing, I think. He will not speak to me. He will not speak to anyone. I came only because I didn't know who else to tell."

"I will watch for him."

"Do not approach. He will only know I told you."

"Only watch."

"Yes."

Kitsa nodded. Some weight transferred from her shoulders to Idonea's, and Idonea let it settle.

A silence opened between them. Kitsa's gaze drifted past Idonea, to the dim corner where the lamplight didn't reach, and her face changed in a way Idonea didn't understand at first.

"Can I ask you something?"

"Mm."

"Your tattoos. The ones on your back."

Idonea went very still.

"How do you know about them?"

A flush crept up Kitsa's pale throat. "I may have spied them through the window. They are beautiful."

"Thank you."

"Did your mother do them?"

"Yes." The word sat like a stone in her mouth.

"All of them?"

"All of them. One a year. Since I was twenty."

Kitsa was silent for a long moment. When she spoke, her voice had dropped to something reverent. "My grandmother used to talk about marks like that."

Idonea's heart began a slow, dreadful climb into her throat. "What about them?"

"Not the design. I don't know the design. But the pattern. One a year. She said it was the old way. She said witches don't do them anymore. She said when they did, it was for—"

She stopped. Idonea couldn't breathe. The cottage had gone impossibly still around her. *Do not ask. Do not.* But the question came anyway. "For what?"

Kitsa shook her head, frustration working across her young face. "I don't remember. She died when I was very young. Before they brought me here. I have only the one season of her, the summer before my mother went

into the fields full time. After that there was no one to take me to my grandmother's house, and then she was gone. I was probably making it up. Children make up a great deal."

But she was not making it up. Idonea saw it in the way Kitsa wouldn't quite meet her eyes, the way her fingers had tightened around nothing until the knuckles had gone white. The girl remembered something, remembered enough to be afraid.

A different chill settled along Idonea's spine. Whatever Kitsa's grandmother had known, the Order had let die with her, and the woman who might've asked, Kitsa's mother, had been gone five years by the time the question would've meant anything.

"Kitsa."

"Yes?"

"If you remember. Will you tell me?"

Kitsa's eyes were very green and very clear in the lamplight, and there was a weight in them that no one that young should've had to carry.

"Yes. I will tell you."

Idonea swallowed against the burning in her throat and managed a nod.

Kitsa didn't stay long after that. She'd started to look a little grey around the mouth, and Idonea saw what she'd not seen before: the cottage was wearing on her, draining her, the way it'd been draining Idonea.

"You should go."

"I know."

Idonea sat at the table for a long time after. The lamp guttered low, and the wind moved against the eaves and was quiet again. She looked at her own thumb in the lamplight, at the dragon-eye ring she'd stopped noticing somewhere along the way. She turned it once around her finger. The pale green slitted iris caught the light, then dimmed.

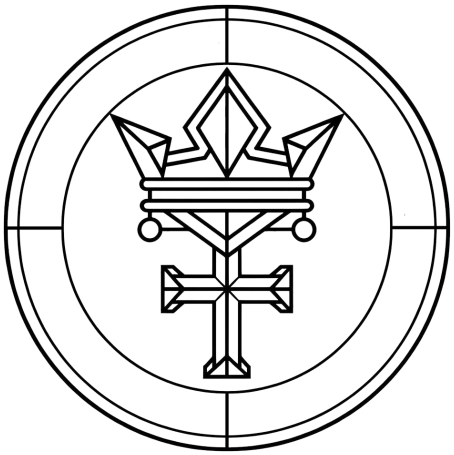
One a year. The old way. For —

She didn't finish the thought. She could not. Her chest was too tight, her hands too unsteady, and somewhere beneath the floorboards was the faint echo of Kitsa's footsteps fading into the dark. A girl whose grandmother had taken half a teaching to the grave, because the only summer in which she might have passed it down was the summer before the fields had taken her daughter. The Order kept a careful schedule of separations. Idonea hadn't understood, until now, how much that schedule

was designed to keep witches from knowing what their own grandmothers had known.

She pressed her palms against her eyes until she saw stars.

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Chapter 16

The door's bar screeched as it slid free.

Idonea stirred from where she sat huddled on the floor. Her neck ached from sleeping upright against the wall, her spine stiff. Every joint protested as she uncurled herself. She rubbed her eyes with the heels of her palms and slid her glasses back into place.

The door creaked open. Lysander stepped through, boots echoing dully. His eyes flicked from her on the floor to the untouched bed. His jaw twitched.

"Your father wants a word."

She made no attempt to move. "He knows where to find me."

His left hand tightened. "It isn't just him."

"We should be hunting that daemon," she said, looking at him. "You should be. Isn't that your purpose?"

"I have my orders." He averted his gaze, a muscle ticking in his cheek.

Idonea's chest wrenched with the weight of all the things she wanted to say. She turned her face away.

"You should come."

She stood from the floor, smoothing out her clothes. "Very well."

He opened the door, stepping aside. As she passed, her hand brushed against his. Her skin sparked at the contact. She froze and he stilled, eyes darting briefly to hers.

Darkness shrouded the town. The cold bit straight through her cloak. Mist clung low around the houses, swallowing colour until only the gas lamps still looked alive.

He didn't slow for her. Idonea followed anyway, boots crunching against the snow. The long hall loomed ahead.

Behind a long, wooden table in a high-backed chair, sat Alcaeus. The Magistrate and Elzhbeta sat on either side, expressions pinched and

calculating. Before them, a spread of food.

Idonea sat in a chair across from them. Hunger snarled in her gut at the smell of roasted game, at the sight of beetroot and mushrooms.

Alcaeus pushed a plate towards her. “Help yourself.”

She pushed the plate away. “Prisoners aren’t given such meals.” Her stomach tightened as if to protest the act of defiance.

Alcaeus looked up at Lysander. “You may leave us.”

There was a pause, a hesitation. Lysander nodded once and turned away. Idonea’s eyes followed him, noting the tension in his movements. He didn’t glance back. She hated noticing when he left a room.

Alcaeus returned the plate to her. “You need to eat, Idonea. You wear no shackles.”

She folded her arms across her chest. “Why am I here?” she asked, chin lifted.

The hall was silent but for the faint crackle of the fire and the occasional creak of the floorboards. Her stomach growled. Her gaze flicked to Elzhbeta, whose dark eyes tracked her.

Alcaeus’ hands rested on the table. He looked to the Magistrate before returning his gaze to her. “We don’t want a panic. We can’t tell the others of the daemon attack.”

“The attack will be explained as a misuse of Current,” the Magistrate said.

Idonea shook her head. Her laugh, bitter, muted. “Of course. Propagate fear of their own selves. Easier than facing what’s out there.”

She sat back, letting the chair support her weight. Neither of them answered. She thought of Lysander, his silence. She thought of the way his hand had lingered near hers. He’d promised they’d hunt the relic. The daemon.

Her fingers knotted in her lap.

“Why cover it up?” she asked. “They’re bound to doubt your story.”

Elzhbeta leaned forward. “They’re children. They have no reason to doubt us.”

Idonea’s mouth twisted. “They have a right to truth.”

Alcaeus let out a long breath. “If they thought a daemon was out there. That something slipped through the Nexis, well, this place would eat itself alive.”

“But you will hunt it down?” Her gaze went between the three of them.

Alcaeus leaned back. “You’ll stay close to Lysander for now. We’ll revisit your other request again, later.”

Her brows lifted. “So, I’m not shackled, but leashed?”

“Don’t mistake freedom for trust,” the Magistrate said.

She stood abruptly, her chair clattering to the ground behind her. “I never have.”

Lysander waited outside, arms folded. “Well?”

“They’re cowards,” she said, brushing past him. “A witch cannot let a daemon live. Nor should you.”

He followed, steps falling into rhythm with hers. “Your father is right. We can’t afford panic.”

“They *should*,” she said. “A daemon doesn’t just appear. Something’s wrong.”

“I know.”

She halted.

He stopped beside her, close enough she could smell the nutmeg tang that always clung to him.

“It has to be tied to the relic you hunt.”

Her pulse slowed. “Then why obey them? Why lie for them?”

His jaw tightened. “Because if I don’t … someone worse will.”

She studied him. Not the cut of his jaw or breadth of his shoulders, though those were hard to ignore, but the tension in his posture.

“Then work with me.”

His expression flared. “I’m what I have to be,” he said.

Their eyes locked. The air between them stretched taut, and then she stepped back.

“Then let’s be what we have to be,” she said. “For now.”

He said nothing, but nodded once.

She wanted, needed, to return to the chapel. To the place where the girl died. Something still persisted there, a residue in the air, like ash in the lungs.

A Templar stepped before her, his gaze set on Lysander. “Exemplar Alcaeus has decreed she has no access to this area.”

Lysander’s silence was colder than the wind. Beyond the Templar, near the chapel’s entrance, Kitsa raised a hand in a silent greeting. Idonea lifted her own. She didn’t want to cause a scene, not yet.

“Come, then,” Lysander said.

But the Templars corralled them. They didn’t let her past the main square.

“Confinement,” she muttered. Rage pressed hot behind her ribs. They should be hunting, warding, preparing. Instead, they were guarding her.

“Very, well,” she said, “to my cottage.”

Lysander followed, silently. Instead, she paused in the entryway. His figure filled the doorframe behind her. With him inside, he couldn’t lock the door. A keen smile curled at her lips.

She sank into a chair at the table, fingers drumming against the worn wood with restless energy. “Shall you stand there all day?” she asked.

“No,” he said. “I’ll sleep on the floor when you sleep.”

She blinked, once. “Very well. I shall bathe, then.”

“It is not yet midday.”

“What else am I to do?” she called over her shoulder, already making for the bathroom. “Gouge my eyes out?”

Lysander didn’t reply.

“But I would like fresh clothes,” she added.

His eyes narrowed. “Fine. I’ll be right back.”

With his absence, Idonea pumped water into the tub and gathered up the scented soap and wash cloth. She’d take her time. Needed the time to think.

The water was warm, and she savoured the scent of lavender. She leaned her head back and closed her eyes.

Lysander’s footsteps marked his return, though he never came near the bathroom. The water clung to her like a second skin, letting the heat and silence steep into her bones.

Idonea stayed until her fingertips were wrinkled. She tied the towel over herself, put her glasses back on, and padded barefoot to the bed.

The clothes laid out for her stopped her mid-step.

Black. Everything black. A corset of underbust leather, a high-neck blouse of charcoal silk, fleece-lined leggings, and a skirt of heavy velvet layered over wool, short in front, dramatic behind.

Who had worn these before me? The thought slithered through her mind, unwelcome.

She dressed, half-expecting to feel watched.

Idonea returned to a seat at the table. “What does the mother think?”

Lysander took in her damp curls. “Once they turn fourteen, their parents are sent on their way.”

“The Order is that desperate for control.” She shook her head.

They both lapsed into silence.

“There is nothing worse than inactivity,” she said eventually.

“We can play draughts,” he said.

She raised an eyebrow. “There is a playing board in here?”

He moved to a cabinet close by. Admittedly, Idonea hadn’t really searched that hard. He pulled out a wooden container that opened to the draughts board, and a velvet bag containing the black and white playing pieces. She let him set the game up.

“You’ve done this before,” she said.

“Many nights are long,” he replied, setting the white pieces before her.

She glanced at the unguarded door.

“I can move faster, witchling,” he said.

A threat or a promise, she wasn’t sure.

She slid a piece forward with deliberate precision. “Then you’ll have to prove it.”

Lysander moved his counter in silence, gaze flicking between the board and her face. Each movement was precise, calculated, as if every gesture mattered.

“You play like someone who doesn’t trust the board,” he said.

She arched an eyebrow. “Or like someone who knows the board is lying.”

An exhale, not quite a laugh, escaped him.

They played mostly in silence. The only sounds were the dull scrape of pieces. Every time his hand brushed the board near hers, that same pulse of static, a soft prickle that raced up her arm. He didn’t notice.

“Your mother taught you?” he asked after a while.

Her jaw tightened. “She taught me to play to win. Not to enjoy it.”

Lysander studied the board, then moved another piece, cornering hers. “And did you?”

She looked up. “Once.”

The piece was lost, but she didn’t move to reclaim it. The game wasn’t about victory, not anymore.

When he claimed another of her counters, she leaned back, crossing her arms. “You think too far ahead.”

“That’s the point,” he said.

“It’s also the flaw.” Her eyes met his, sharp and deliberate. “You assume the enemy will play by the same rules.”

He said nothing, his hand stilling over the board. “And you don’t?”

“I never play the same game twice.”

The air between them hummed.

“Then I should stop underestimating you.”

She smiled faintly. “Maybe you already have.”

The game ended without a victor. They played another game, and another. The hours slipped by unnoticed. The only interruptions came when Lidiya arrived with food. She’d set down a tray of bread and soup, never speaking, eyes darting once to the board before leaving again.

Lysander won most. Each defeat scraped against Idonea’s patience. She told herself it didn’t matter, but each time he claimed another piece, bitterness flared beneath her ribs.

“Again?” he asked, setting the board anew.

She nodded, jaw tight.

The game unfolded in silence. His strategy was unyielding, while hers was born of instinct and spite.

When she lost again, she exhaled through her nose, steady but sharp. “You make it look easy.”

He didn’t smile, but the corner of his mouth twitched. “Practice. Years of it.”

She moved another piece, though the game was already lost. “Why did you join the Order?” she asked.

She thought he’d ignore it. He leaned back in his chair, studying her.

“I was an orphan,” he said at last. “Like many of us.”

Idonea’s gaze softened despite herself. “I’m sorry.” She meant it.

He reached for one of the pieces, turning it absently between his fingers. “I was ten when my mother died,” he said. “For a time, it was my sister and me. Then slavers found us. Took her, and left me for dead. The Order took me in after.”

He didn’t mention his arm, and Idonea wondered if it was from the slavers, or a daemon.

“And your sister?” she asked. A hollowness ached in her chest as her mind drifted to Dyota.

His left hand flexed. “Never found her.”

She wanted to reach out, but the gesture faltered. Her hand hovered halfway across the table, before she caught herself and drew it back to her lap.

“Have you kept looking?”

Lysander looked away. “The Order keeps me busy.”

She snapped inside, brushing her hand across the board, sending the white pieces tumbling.

“I’m done.” The words came out raw.

The clatter of the pieces filled the silence.

She gazed one last time at Lysander before storming to the bedroom and slamming the door. She couldn’t comprehend not looking. Couldn’t imagine stopping. She would bleed for Nellith. She’d burn the Republic to save Dyota.

Flat on the bed, she stared at the ceiling, at the thin silver rods of Lodamante running through the beams like veins.

It didn’t take long for Lysander to follow her into the bedroom. He closed the door behind him, and didn’t speak. He simply moved to the floor and sat with his back against it, legs drawn up loosely.

Idonea turned away. Her chest burned with a pressure she couldn’t name. The air between them thickened. Her breath sounded too loud.

At last, she gave in. The bed creaked beneath her as she climbed under the blanket. Lysander shifted once on the floor, adjusting his position.

She turned to lie on her side, eyes upon him. The chill of the room crept down the back of her neck, nudging her to tug the blanket higher. The motion pulled the collar of her shift aside.

His attention sharpened. “What are those stars?”

Her fingers stilled against the blanket. “What?”

“Along your collarbone,” he said. “I’ve seen them before. But I never asked.”

She closed her eyes. Of all the things he asked. Silence pressed in.

“What are they for?” he asked.

She rolled onto her back. “Jovana,” she said.

Idonea hated how even the whisper of her name brought the threatening sting of tears.

“She did them,” Idonea went on, voice steady only because she forced it to be. “So I wouldn’t forget her.”

His gaze didn’t leave the stars. “I imagine you don’t.”

“She wanted me to look up,” Idonea said. “And remember that some things don’t vanish.”

“What happened when she died?”

Her throat tightened. “I stopped letting anyone in.”

Neither of them moved.

“Thank you,” he said at last. “For trusting me with that.”

She turned her head, just enough to look at him. “Don’t mistake honesty for trust.”

A smile ghosted across his mouth. “Noted.”

She pulled the blanket higher, covering the stars once more. She watched him a moment longer. The light caught the side of his face and his throat. He looked tired.

"Can I ask you something?"

"Mm."

"How does a Severant truly fight a daemon with no Current?"

A long pause. He didn't turn his head.

"Severants don't need the Current," he said. "We drink Eitr. From a young age, measured doses. The first dose almost killed me."

Idonea's stomach tightened. *Children. They gave it to children.*

Lysander continued, "the Order calls it a sanctification. It builds something in the blood. The daemons are repelled by the Eitr presence within us."

She didn't speak, an undercurrent of realisation about what made Severants dangerous to daemons. They were ingesting the blood of dragons, of witchwyrms, the very things that hunted daemons across boundaries between worlds.

"It costs," he said. "We don't sleep well. We don't father children. The Order considers it a fair trade for what we can do. We're built not to want. Not to keep. The Eitr makes sure of it. Or it's supposed to." He still didn't look at her.

"Why are you telling me this?" She wanted to tell him to stop.

A small shrug. "You told me about Jovana."

"That's not the same thing."

"No. But it's close."

"Will it kill you?" She had to know.

"Yes. Eventually. The Order says forty. Some make it to forty-five. The longest-lived Severants are kept in monasteries where the public doesn't see

them. Their eyes change. They begin to sense the Nexis without trying. The Order says it is sanctification. I think it is the body remembering, finally, what the blood is."

"Becoming."

"Becoming, yes. Whatever the witchwyrms were, the Order has been making echoes of them in human bodies, and the longest-living ones begin to remember what they are echoes of. The Order does not tell the candidates that part. I don't think the Order tells itself."

Idonea was quiet a long time. "Lysander."

"Yes."

"I am sorry."

"Do not be."

"I am anyway. I am sorry for the boy who was ten. I am sorry for the boy who was twelve. I am sorry for what you carry."

A very quiet sound from the floor beside the bed. He didn't say anything for a while.

When he spoke again, his voice was lower than it had been. "Thank you, witchling."

"Mm."

Neither of them said anything else for a long time.

True night called to her. Lysander’s breathing, low and steady, sounded beyond the bed.

She waited, counting the rise and fall of his breath. He had said he never truly slept, but surely that was jest. The weight in her chest pressed tighter the longer she lay still. She couldn’t stay, she needed the chapel for answers.

She slipped from the bed and padded across the cold floor. Lysander’s prone form blocked the door; one arm tucked beneath his head. He looked peaceful.

She hesitated. Her throat constricted. With slow care, she stepped around him, breath tight in her chest. Her fingers brushed the doorframe. She held her breath as she nudged the door open.

Lysander stirred, the faint flex of his fingers.

Her pulse roared in her ears. She waited, unmoving. Then nothing, stillness again.

She slipped one foot through the doorway, then her body. Her hand wrapped around the front doorknob.

A hand clamped down over her mouth.

The grip was firm, unyielding, another arm coiling around her waist and yanking her back. Her heels scraped against the floorboards, the motion too sudden for thought.

She bit down, hard.

His hiss of pain was a curse against her cheek. His low growl vibrated from his chest into her spine.

He spun her, pinning her against the wall beside the door, the impact rattling through her spine, knocking the air from her lungs.

His hand dropped from her mouth. Neither moved.

Deep shadow cast over his face, but his fury undeniable.

“I told you I was faster,” he said, breath hot against her face.

Idonea thrashed against him, her palms pressing hard against his chest, but his weight didn’t budge. The wall bit into her spine. His hands caught her shoulders, firm enough to bruise.

Her pulse stuttered. She wanted to wrench away, to shout, but the words caught in her throat.

She forced herself to meet his eyes. But her body betrayed her, every nerve sparking beneath his grip. His heartbeat thudded where his chest met hers.

“Curse you!” She swallowed hard, defiance flickering despite the tremor in her limbs.

His fingers flexed against her shoulders, holding her there, not rough but unyielding. “You think I want you caged here?” he said. “You can’t step out that door. You’d make it worse.”

Her own chest ached and his nearness blurred the world down to heat and heartbeat.

“Let me go,” she whispered.

Lysander’s eyes flicked downward to her mouth. The shift was barely there, but it lit a spark beneath her skin. Her stomach twisted. Her throat went dry. *Don’t you dare*.

Her body didn’t listen. Her lips parted, the breath that escaped caught on his. The thought that followed was sharp and senseless: *if he kissed me, I might let him*.

Horror flooded in after. She hated herself for it. Hated the tremor in her limbs, the burn in her chest.

Lysander’s jaw tightened. He tore his gaze away first.

“Let me show you something.”

She blinked up at him. “What?”

“I’ll take that as a yes.” He stepped back, his hands falling from her shoulders. The sudden distance jarred her.

Idonea, still breathless, adjusted her glasses with shaking fingers. Her heart wasn’t calm, and her skin tingled where he’d held her.

He moved over to the dining table. “You’ll see.”

Her eyes slid back to the front door, but he pushed the table aside. He lifted the rug and revealed the hatch door.

Her eyebrows shot up. Lysander knew about the hatch, the same hatch Kitsa had used.

“Leads to a basement,” he said.

“Does this basement go anywhere?” she asked, curious to know if Lysander knew where it led.

“Links to your father’s. But it is latched with a key." He paused. "He gave the key to me last spring."

The hatch opened with a groan. Cold, stale air bled up from the dark below, a stench of damp metal reached her nostrils.

Idonea paused at the edge of the stairs, peering into the gullet of the house, down into that breathless dark.

He extended his right hand behind him without looking. She hesitated.

Her pride said *no*. Her curiosity said *yes*. Her heart beat too loud.

She placed her fingers in his. His grip was firm, grounding, and infuriatingly warm.

The stairs were steep, carved in thick beams that groaned with every step. She kept her free hand braced against the stone wall, dampness slick against her palm. Halfway down, Lysander lit another wall sconce, then another.

The passage opened into a low-ceilinged room, ribbed with arching wooden supports that had blackened with time. Shadows danced across the walls. The floor was stone, stained in patches Idonea couldn’t quite place—ink, or oil, or something darker.

Three long metal tables stood in the centre, cluttered with twisted copper coils, cogs, glinting wires, strips of leather, and chains of silver.

She looked up, and he stared at her. “What is all this?”

Lysander didn’t answer immediately. He walked towards one of the tables, trailing his fingers over the array. “My workshop,” he said. “Where I

work when the Order isn’t watching.”

She followed. “And what do you make?”

His gaze flicked to her, then back to the coils and chains. “I’ve been working on daemon traps.”

Her eyes snapped to him. “You can’t trap one. A daemon must be banished, not chained. You’d invite the Nexis through the cracks.”

He sighed. “Not everyone can banish them, witchling. Not everyone has your blood. The Order needs other means.”

“The Order,” she said, letting the name curdle on her tongue. “They play at control with things they can’t understand.”

She moved to the table beside his, running her fingertips across a delicate row of etched rings. “You also have these.”

Silence hung between them again as he stepped closer.

“You wear no silver.” Lysander picked up one ring and held it out to her.

She took the offered ring, admiring its fine nature before slipping it on a finger. Lysander’s eyes tracked every movement.

She turned, sweeping her gaze across the tables again. “If they find this __”

“They won’t.” He stepped even closer until his warmth pressed against her like a second skin. “Unless you tell them.”

Her pulse faltered, then steadied. She turned her head just enough to meet his eyes. “And the key? You said this goes to Alcaeus’ house.”

“In my possession.”

Her pulse fluttered. “And?”

“Maybe there’ll be a use for it,” he murmured. “I’ve bled for the order. Killed for them. But—”

He stopped himself, looking away. Gritted his jaw.

“But?” she pressed.

“The daemon. The relic. You’re right that idleness is death.”

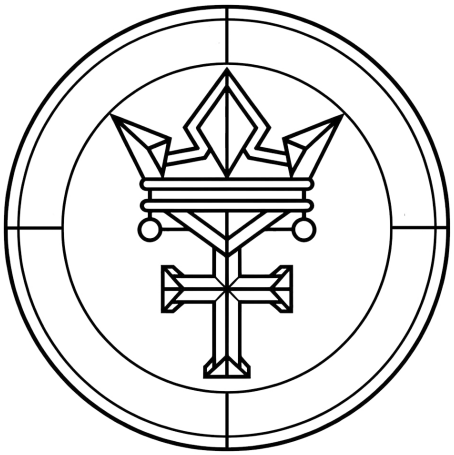
The words hung like smoke.

Idonea took a step back, but her spine found the edge of the table. Her breath trembled between them.

He wasn’t as loyal as she’d believed.

She didn't know yet what to do with that.

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Chapter 17

Idonea woke before the dawn when the cottage was very still. Lysander had gone to Alcaeus's house overnight, she thought; the door was barred, and the air was cold.

She thought about the basement.

Lysander had shown her the workshop. He had said the passage led to her father's house and was latched with a key. He hadn't said what else was below; what was on the other side of the workshop's walls; whether the floor she'd stood on was as solid as it looked. He had carried the lamp and she'd followed. She wanted to go back without him.

The rug was heavy, and the hatch was heavier. She lifted it as quietly as the iron would let her. The cold breath of the passage came up. She went down with no lamp; she didn't want a light to be visible at the top of the stairs if Lysander returned early. The dark was complete as she trailed her hand along the wall.

At the bottom, she stopped. The workshop was as he'd left it. She didn't approach the long tables, instead creeping along the wall. The hatch at the far end was, as far as she could tell by feel, latched and locked. She tested it with her shoulder. It held.

She put her hand flat against the wall opposite the door. Stone, then a join, then more stone. She edged along, finding no panel her hands could read, no latch, no second door. If the workshop hid anything from her, it was not on this wall.

Idonea didn't yet have the tools or the time to search properly, but she'd been down, and she'd checked. She would come back when she'd a longer hour and a steadier nerve.

She climbed up, replacing the rug and then the table. The cottage looked exactly as it had when she'd risen. She washed her face, fastened her cloak, and stood in the centre of the room, waiting for the day to begin.

Grey clouds sprawled low across the horizon, heavy with unshed snow, faintly lit by the grey haze that passed for daylight this far north. The chill sank into Idonea's bones as she stepped outside, breath drifting in the air. Above, the silhouette of Lance perched upon the roof, his yellow eyes catching hers.

Still there. Still alive.

Lysander walked behind her, his footfalls steady, measured.

Alcaeus' house loomed, its sharp angles swallowed in the gloom. The door creaked open on command, and the warmth inside hollow.

Alcaeus sat in the same armchair as last time. "Idonea," he said.

She remained standing, arms crossed. "We're losing time on the relic."

"I know," he said, his gaze flicking to Lysander's presence. "Tomorrow. You both will start the search."

Idonea glanced back at Lysander. "We came here for reinforcements."

Alcaeus sighed. "The Magistrate will not let any Templars go. Not after that attack. And, you don't want to tell the High Hierophant."

Her eyes narrowed. "You're not telling me something."

"Please," he said, "take your win."

Victory had never tasted so bitter.

Idonea turned to leave and then looked back. "The Templars won't stop me?"

"Not with Lysander at your side."

She didn't like how that sounded, that Lysander was both shield and leash.

Outside, she didn't pause, her boots crunching through snow with purpose. The chapel called to her. Lysander trailed behind, silent. Watching.

"What do you hope to find?" he asked at last.

Idonea turned to face him. The wind teased a strand of hair across her cheek. "You and I both know how it feels to lose a sister. Edik deserves justice."

He stepped closer. "And?"

"The sigil," she said. "I can use it to track the daemon. Freshly, accurately."

With a nod, he led her closer towards the chapel. He crouched down beside the steps, fingers brushing over the hardened ground, all remnants of blood gone. "This is where it happened."

She knelt beside him, sweeping snow aside with gloved fingers. Her stomach sank. The sigil was gone, erased as if the ground itself had been scrubbed of truth.

“Someone’s removed it.” She sat back on her haunches. “But … how?”

Idonea’s fingers touched the stars upon her collarbone, eyes widening. The sound she’d heard the night of the murder. Something had come back. It wasn’t just a wraith watching. It was standing sentry.

Lysander touched her on the shoulder. “We will find it.”

She wanted to believe him. She rose, shaking snow from her gloves. “There is nothing left here.”

Behind them, the chapel doors groaned open, spilling a faint, sickly light into the dark. The other witches stepped out.

“Idonea!”

Kitsa bounded towards them. Her cheeks were flushed, and eyes gleaming. She moved with a reckless lightness that knocked something loose in Idonea's chest. Dyota had run exactly like that, arms swinging wide, too fast for the space she was in.

Idonea crushed the thought before it could become grief.

“Is she free?” Kitsa asked, tilting her head at Lysander.

His expression tightened. “No.”

“Come with me,” she said, grabbing Idonea’s hand. “Help me.”

“Kitsa—”

But the girl was already tugging her along, steps light and careless across the snow. Idonea cast a look back. Lysander hadn’t moved. He watched her long after they left the square.

Kitsa led her past the stables, down a trail hemmed in by skeletal trees. Ice glittered on every branch.

Halfway down the path, a figure rose from the riverbank and moved towards them through the mist, carrying nothing. Lidiya was walking up from the river alone.

Idonea's neck prickled. *What was she doing down there?*

The woman slowed as she neared, her dark eyes flicking between them. "Kitsa." Her voice was low, weary.

"Lidiya." Kitsa's grip on Idonea's wrist tightened a fraction.

They stopped on the path, the two of them, Kitsa half-turned, Lidiya with her boots planted in the snow. Lysander was ten paces behind and stopped as well.

"You're taking her down."

"I am."

Lidiya nodded once. "Mind the second rock." Her gaze drifted to the river behind them. "The one nearest the far bank. The lichen's loose. I nearly went in last week."

Kitsa offered a smile. "I'll mind it."

"Good." But Lidiya didn't move on. Her eyes had found Idonea now, and held there, steady and unblinking. Idonea forced herself not to look away, though the weight of that gaze pressed against her chest like a held breath. The birthmark beneath Lidiya's left eye stood stark against her skin.

"I have brought you soup. You didn't eat it."

"I was—" Idonea began.

"I know."

A silence, but Lidiya's gaze hadn't shifted.

"I'll have warm food at the hall when you come back," she said. "If you come back hungry, eat. If you do not, leave it. I don't mind either way."

"Thank you."

Lidiya inclined her head a fraction. She looked once more at Idonea, longer than was comfortable but not so long as to be impolite, and then her eyes flicked briefly to Lysander where he stood on the path behind, and then she resumed her walk past them.

Her shoulder brushed Idonea's as she passed. The shawl smelled faintly of woodsmoke and damp herbs.

Kitsa was already moving again. She didn't turn to watch Lidiya go.

"She doesn't talk to many people," Kitsa said, as if it were nothing. "Don't take it personally."

"I didn't."

"She likes you, I think."

"How could you tell?"

"She talked to you."

Idonea glanced back, briefly. Lidiya was already further up the path, and she didn't look back.

“How old are you?” Idonea asked.

“Nineteen,” Kitsa said, grinning over her shoulder. She veered towards the riverbank. “There’s a patch of herbs across the river. Come on.”

“They let you wander down here all on your own?”

The mist off the river was thick enough to blur the treeline.

“Why not?” she asked. “Well, there is a Templar on watch nearby.”

Idonea couldn’t believe they hadn’t told the witches of the daemon. How dangerous it was to be out like this, unwarded, and unprepared.

Kitsa leapt onto a mossy rock slick with lichen, then bounded to the other side with a dancer’s grace. She turned and waved. “Easy!”

Idonea hesitated. Her boots weren’t made for this. Lysander had caught up to them. She could feel the heat of him, unsettling in its muted steadiness.

She jumped, landing on the rock with a skid. *Wonderful*. Lysander’s hand ghosted near her elbow but didn’t touch. She hated that she noticed.

Kitsa caught her after the next jump and spun her forward, laughing like they were children.

Lysander crossed with ease and didn’t speak. Of course he didn’t.

Beyond the trees, the clearing appeared. A hollow in the forest, rich soil where there should've been frost. Not a flake of snow touched the ground. The air carried the faint sweetness of green growth, wrong for this season.

Kitsa unlatched the crooked wooden gate and slipped inside. Idonea followed, drawn despite herself as warmth pressed against her face, soft and damp. Her breath didn’t mist here.

Lysander stopped at the gate, arms folded. He didn’t cross the threshold.

“You told him not to come in?” Idonea asked.

“He trampled my rosemary once,” Kitsa said with exaggerated scorn, stepping between the rows of green.

"Why is the garden over here?" Idonea asked. "Not in the village?"

Kitsa shrugged. "These plants like to be near other plants. There's another field further down, you can't see it from here. Bigger, for Eitr roots." She pulled a sprig of rosemary and rolled it between her fingers. "Us older girls work it. When you're fourteen, you start. They put me on the row my mother worked, until last winter when the soil gave out. Most of us start where our mothers ended."

"The roots?"

Kitsa looked away. "It's hard work. You have to use Resonance with them. They don't grow if you fight them."

Idonea watched the girl's hands still in the soil. "What happens after you finish your training?"

"We get assigned at twenty." Kitsa smiled. "Wherever the Order needs us. There are farms all over the Republic."

"Does anyone refuse?" Idonea asked Kitsa, low.

Kitsa didn't look at her. "Where would we go? The Order pays for our food, our beds, our clothes. We were brought here as children. Most of us don't remember anywhere else."

“But you come here every day?”

“Of course.” Kitsa knelt beside a sage bush, hands moving like a prayer. Her breath slowed and the air shifted.

The warmth deepened. Idonea’s pulse picked up. She looked to the fence. Frost clung to the outer posts, but inside the wood dripped with condensation.

Kitsa’s lips moved in a whisper too low to hear. Current stirred.

“You’re accessing it,” Idonea said, watching the subtle change ripple through the ground.

Kitsa opened one eye, mischief dancing there. “Most of these herbs shouldn’t grow here. But rules don’t apply if you ask nicely.”

“Ask?” The word sat strange in her mouth, foreign.

Her face broke into a grin. “You ever tried?”

Idonea shook her head. She’d studied Resonant practices but never used them. Too fragile, too dependent on feeling. She’d learned to command magic, not court it.

Kitsa patted the earth beside her. “Sit. Try.”

Idonea hesitated. She shot a glance at Lysander, but he didn’t stop her. She sank to her knees beside Kitsa. The soil was warm, impossibly so.

Kitsa grinned. “The Current doesn't take orders. It takes invitations.”

“And what does it feel like?”

Kitsa smiled. “Like breathing. Like a memory. Like falling and being caught at the same time.”

The younger witch guided her hands to hover near a rosemary bush. Its leaves trembled.

Idonea closed her eyes. She tried to let go, to open.

An answer, a faint shimmer under her skin. The Current brushed against her awareness, and then shuddered.

A pulse rippled through the ground. The rosemary’s leaves quivered, but no growth came. Instead, a thin crack split the soil beneath her fingers.

Idonea flinched. The Current recoiled, slipping away. She exhaled sharply, chest tight, heartbeat hammering.

“You fought it,” Kitsa whispered, one corner of her mouth lifting.

“I didn’t intend to.”

Idonea drew her hands back, palms tingling. The air still shimmered faintly as her pupils normalised.

Kitsa smiled. “You’ll learn. Pride scares it off.”

Idonea curled her nails into her palms, hoping to hide them away. Her fingers were warm, but at the western edge of the garden sat a wrongness.

She turned her head. There was a patch of soil near the fence post two paces across, where the warmth didn't reach. The plants there were dead. Not winter-dormant, but dead. Their leaves had blackened where they touched the cold patch, and the soil itself looked dry.

"What is that?"

Kitsa followed her gaze. Her smile dimmed.

"It came this winter. The first frost. I don't know why."

"You've tried to mend it?"

"Three times. The Current won't go into that patch. It bends around it." She turned back to her own bed of herbs and wouldn't look at the cold patch again. "I don't bring the younger witches here anymore."

Kitsa shook her head. “Try again."

Idonea opened herself further. The Current flowed through her, light gliding along her nerves, whispering through her blood.

Everything clamoured around her. And then, something off-key. A faint discord beneath the harmony.

“Easy,” Kitsa murmured. “Don’t pull. Listen.”

Idonea forced herself to breathe, to release. The Current steadied. When she opened her eyes, the rosemary shimmered faintly, its leaves trembling as if exhaling.

“See?” Kitsa said. “It answers.”

Idonea’s pulse still raced. “What if it doesn’t?”

Kitsa’s grin didn’t falter. “Then it takes what it’s owed.”

Idonea drew her hands back, breaking contact with the soil. The Current still shimmered through her blood.

Kitsa watched her with that too-wide smile. “You did well.”

They continued to work in rhythm, tending soil, harvesting herbs that hummed with strange life. Idonea matched Kitsa’s pace, her movements

stiff at first, then more fluid as it drew her in.

“I’ll miss this place,” Kitsa said after a long silence.

Idonea glanced over. “Why?”

Kitsa plucked a sprig of rosemary and rolled it between her palms. “A few months, and I’m gone. I'll be twenty.”

Idonea frowned. “Where will you go?”

Kitsa shrugged. “Doesn’t matter. The Order doesn’t like roots. They prefer branches.”

The words struck deep inside Idonea.

Before she could answer, Lysander’s voice cut through the silence. “Enough. You’ve had your lesson.”

Kitsa stretched and beamed. “Time for lunch anyway.”

Idonea wiped her hands clean against her skirt. As she followed Lysander back up the path, her palms still tingled. Every sound pressed in; the crunch of snow, the whisper of wind, the slow rhythm of his boots beside hers. Kitsa trailed behind, humming.

They all went to the hall. The scent of roasted rabbit and hearth-smoke met them at the door. The warmth of the crowd was loud, but she couldn’t shake the chill that still settled in her chest.

Kitsa brushed past her, cheeks flushed from cold and light, while Lysander held the door.

Rather than take her place at the high table with those who commanded the room, Idonea chose a seat among the witches instead.

At the far end of the bench sat the lone warlock, Edik. He hunched forward, elbows tight to his ribs, afraid to take up too much space. His bowl of stew sat untouched, steam thinning in the cold air. His fingers worried at the edge of his sleeve, the fabric already frayed from repetition. Idonea watched him.

Some of the younger witches still had their mothers with them. They smothered their laughs.

Three of the older girls came in late, hair still damp from washing. They sat together at the end of the long table and ate, the way people eat when they've been outside in cold all day. None of them spoke. One of them rolled her shoulder while she chewed, as if it was sore.

The meal wound down. Spoons scraped empty bowls, benches creaked, and conversation thinned.

One girl stood, stretching with feline ease. “It’s my turn to help Lidiya clean up. I’ll meet you at the chapel,” she said with a smile, already turning away.

Something snagged in Idonea’s gut.

Light caught the girl's eyes. Amber ring. Idonea's pulse stumbled hard enough to hurt.

Idonea pushed back her chair, the scrape of wood on stone cutting through the low murmur of the hall. Several heads turned. She barely noticed. Her body was already moving, instinct before thought. She had to reach that girl, stop her.

But a movement in the corner of her vision froze her mid-step.

Alcaeus. He watched her, lifting a hand, summoning her forward.

Her gaze flicked to the side door where the girl slipped through. Her jaw clenched so tightly her teeth ached. The muscles in her legs tensed, coiled to run.

Alcaeus raised his hand again, more insistent this time.

She turned towards him, her chest burning with the effort to keep her breathing steady.

Lysander watched her approach, his brow furrowing the smallest degree.

When she reached the table, Alcaeus leaned forward. “Stay,” he said. “I’d have a word.”

Her gaze slid past him, lingering on the empty doorway. As the others filtered from the hall, she remained standing. Though Lysander hadn’t moved. Elzhbeta gave her a fleeting look before departing.

Silence followed. Only the three of them remained.

Idonea turned towards Alcaeus, chin lifted. “Well?”

“You practised with Current today?” he asked.

Her lips tightened. “It was the Resonant way.”

“I know.” His eyes flicked to Lysander, then back. “You should practice more.”

Idonea’s nostrils flared. “It will not change who I am. What I am.”

Alcaeus said nothing.

When he looked away, she pivoted sharply. She’d barely taken two steps before a hand caught her wrist. Warm, calloused fingers closing with muted insistence. Lysander.

“You’re not thinking clearly,” he said.

She twisted free, but the echo of his touch lingered, electric beneath her skin. "I am," she said. Her breath came sharper than intended. "She had the same eyes."

His voice softened but held its edge. "She'll be at chapel. It's safe."

Idonea turned to face him fully. "She'll be safe when the daemon is dead."

That silenced him. He stood there, jaw tight, his gaze searching hers.

She took the opportunity and moved without another word, and slipped out of the hall. The hall's heat gave way to icy wind. Snow dusted her shoulders as she pulled her cloak tight and headed towards the chapel, footfalls muted by packed snow.

Lysander followed her out. The sound of his boots caught up to hers.

Near the chapel's entrance, a Templar stood guard.

"You cannot enter," he said.

Idonea's mouth opened, ready to argue, but then she saw Lysander's slight shake of the head.

"He is right," Lysander said. "They are in there for lessons. Lessons not open to you."

She inhaled sharply, her breath turning to frost. "Then I'll wait."

Idonea went around to the cemetery, where each headstone leaned under a thin glaze of frost. A new mound caught her eyes near the front, earth still loose beneath its layer of snow. Her chest tightened. A fresh grave.

She stepped closer. The stone was small and simple, the letters sharp and new.

Arina Volkov. Seventeen.

Edik's sister. She then saw it: the same date carved again and again down the rows. Dozens. All ending on the same night.

A bitter chill crept up her spine. "What happened?"

He glanced between her and the headstones. "It was three years ago."

"And?"

He hesitated, gaze flicking to the graves, then to her. "I wasn't here, but they say a Nexis veil tore open."

"A daemon did this?" She took in the number of dead. Had Alcaeus been in charge then?

His left hand flexed. "You'd have to ask your father. He was the only one there. The rest of us have only been here the past two years."

Her gaze drifted back over to the headstones. “I’d like a moment.”

Lysander nodded, letting Idonea enter the cemetery alone, after she asked permission from the Guardian. She knelt at the new stone. The lettering hadn't yet weathered. The chisel-marks were still sharp at the edges.

Idonea sucked in a shaky breath. The hollow for Dyota throbbed in her chest. He’d said she'd been taken three years ago. She hated to think of what horrors she was trapped with, or how Alcaeus could let them take her. The lack of her name on a headstone offered little comfort.

Under Lysander’s quiet watch, Idonea moved around the cemetery, clearing away weeds from the headstones. Headstones of witches. Her throat clogged at the age of some of them. She knew there had to be more to the story Lysander told. A dark secret they lied to everyone about, just like they lied about Arina’s death.

Idonea brushed away dirt from her skirt. “Is the lesson done?”

Lysander held the gate open. “An hour ago. But I didn’t want to disturb you.”

Her laugh came sharp, disbelieving. “So, you let me waste time while another girl walks into the daemon’s jaws?”

His silence confirmed it.

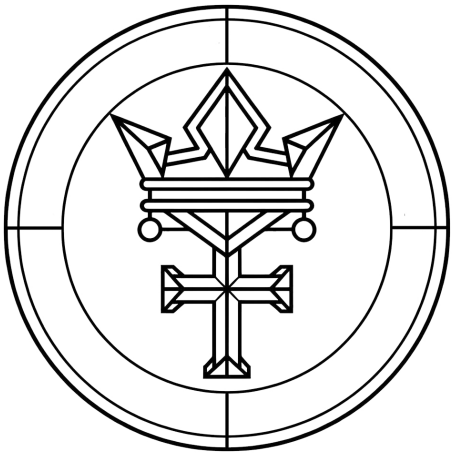
Her temper flared white-hot. “Cowards,” she said. “All of you.”

She stormed past him, snow kicking up in her wake.

Behind her, Lysander’s voice carried faintly through the cold. “Idonea __”

A cry tore open the air.

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Chapter 18

The scream had already died.

Idonea froze, every instinct in her body screaming to *move*, but her blood had turned to ice.

Lysander’s hand clamped around her arm, firm and unyielding. “Stay behind me,” he said. He was already pulling her forward, towards the sound.

She wished he hadn’t. The sight hit her like a blow.

The girl, the one with the amber-ringed eyes, lay sprawled across the chapel steps, her frame twisted unnaturally, a fan of red spreading beneath her. The snow had turned pink where it touched her skin. Her throat was gone. Her chest, opened like a page no one should ever read. One hand raised to ward something off, frozen mid-plea. Her mouth had fallen open, the lower lip slack against the chapel stone.

Lidiya stood nearby in the arms of a Templar, the man's gauntlet at her elbow holding her up rather than holding her in place. Her arms hung loose, and her hands were dark with damp earth, the cold reddening the skin around her knuckles. Her mouth was closed and very tight, but she wasn't weeping.

Idonea’s knees buckled, gripping Lysander’s wrist, fingers numb. All she saw was blood. Red in the snow, red on the chapel stone, red beneath a child's hand.

She couldn’t have been over fifteen. Snowflakes fell soft and silent onto the girl’s cheek, melting instantly against still-warm skin. Then the sleet came, washing thin rivulets of red down the chapel steps.

Idonea followed the trail up to the door. Her gaze found it beside the body in dirt and death: the sigil of Vinea.

Lysander hadn’t released her. His grip on her arm was steady, grounding. For once, she didn’t try to pull free. Without that grip, she

thought her legs might give out entirely.

Above them, Lance broke from the shadows with a shriek that split the cold air. His wings cut across the sleet like black flame. He circled once, twice, and on the third pass he came down low, hovering close enough to the body that the wind from his wings stirred the strands of her hair across her cheek. His tongue flickered out. Not at the sigil. Not at the wound. He held there, breath-close to her face, for a count that was longer than Idonea expected. Then he hissed and darted upward, vanishing into the dark.

Idonea's brow creased. She couldn't hold the question; whatever he'd found was for later.

Footsteps crunched through the snow. Alcaeus approached, his heavy cloak dragging frost in its wake. The Magistrate trailed close behind.

The sleet had turned to a fine, slanting rain, blurring the world into silver and red and shadow.

Idonea broke from Lysander's grip.

She hadn't decided to do it. Her body did it. Three short steps and she was at the girl's side, kneeling. The Templar around Lidiya jerked but didn't let go of her. Lysander whispered her name, but she didn't turn.

She laid two fingertips against the girl's jaw. The skin was still warm, and Idonea's fingers came away wet. She closed the girl's eyes with the side of her thumb, her breath shuddering.

Then Lysander's hand was at her elbow, drawing her up, and she let him. But before she rose, her eyebrows furrowed. The angle of Arina's jaw was wrong. The lower jaw sat off, as though pressed sideways after the fact. Idonea's thumb hovered above the corner of the mouth. She didn't lift the lip. The sleet was washing pink down the chapel stone, and she told herself it was the cold setting the muscles.

Alcaeus took in the scene with a single, cold glance. His gaze brushed Idonea, and hesitated.

“Take her,” he said. “Confine her.”

The words landed like a sentence, not an order.

Lysander moved without hesitation.

His hand tightened around her arm, and he pulled her back. Away from the blood, away from the sigil.

She didn’t fight. The world had narrowed to numbness.

Behind them, more footsteps. Idonea half-turned. Elzhbeta was coming from the direction of the Magistrate's house, her cloak drawn closed, her

steps unhurried. She arrived at her husband's shoulder several heartbeats after he'd already stopped and surveyed the dead. Her face, when Idonea caught it, was composed.

She wore gloves. Heavy leather, dark, gauntleted at the wrist. The leather was wet at the cuffs that didn't match the snow. Lysander, beside Idonea, had pulled one of his own gloves off at some point. The Templar holding Lidiya had bared his right hand. The Magistrate, when he crouched briefly to look at the wound, was bare-handed too. The cold was bad enough to want gloves; handling the dead was bad enough that one took them off.

Elzhbeta did not. She glanced once at Idonea, the look unreadable, and then turned her attention to her husband.

But Lysander didn’t speak for her.

As he led her away through the sleet, Idonea looked once more over her shoulder. The girl’s hand was still raised towards the chapel door, reaching for something that had never come.

He took her back to the cottage, slamming the door behind them. Lysander stood just inside, but didn't speak. Didn't move.

The cold clung to Idonea’s skin like a curse. It soaked through her clothes, down to her bones. Her hair dripped steadily, rivulets pattering onto the wood until a pool spread beneath her boots.

A raw, ragged scream ripped out of her throat.

She seized the nearest chair and hurled it. The impact cracked through the room, wood striking stone, but the chair didn’t shatter. It bounced, whole and useless.

Her chest heaved. “You were with me! You were with me the whole time!”

She staggered to the table, bracing herself against it. The edge bit into her palms, but she welcomed the pain. Her breath came in sharp bursts, her shoulders shaking.

“No!” Her fingers curled, knuckles white. “No, no, no—he can't—.”

She gripped another chair, ready to throw again, desperate to move, to break, to fill the void.

Strong arms closed around her.

Her arms were pinned tight against her sides, her back pressed against a chest that radiated warmth.

“Let me go.” She twisted against him, teeth clenched. “Let me *go*!”

He didn’t. His breath was hot against her temple, controlled.

The fury came back, sharper, more focused, burning through her lungs.

Lysander tightened his grip. “Breathe,” he said.

She fought it, every part of her straining against the word, against him. Her body betrayed her. A breath came, ragged and shallow.

“Please.” His breath ghosted against the curve of her neck. “Calm.”

Her head dropped back against his shoulder. Her hands were fists.

Her legs faltered. The fight drained out of her all at once, leaving her numb. She sagged against him, her body limp, trembling. Lysander didn’t flinch. He bore her weight as if he’d anticipated it.

She stayed there, caught in the cage of his arms.

Then, gently, he moved, guiding her towards the chair she’d nearly broken in her fury. His hand never left her arm, firm but careful.

Her limbs obeyed numbly, sinking down. The chair creaked under the wet weight of her clothes. She bent forward until her forehead pressed against her crossed arms on the table.

Her shoulders shook, but no tears came — only the raw sting of them, the tightness in her throat, the burn behind her eyes, the hollow knowing that another life had been lost.

Lysander stood a long moment behind her, silent. Then his hand rested between her shoulder blades. The heat of him bled through the soaked fabric, grounding her to the moment.

“I will vouch for you,” he said at last. “To your father.”

A bitter laugh rose, but died in her chest. She pulled her glasses off, rubbed the bridge of her nose. “They’ll shackle me regardless.”

Lysander crouched beside her, the movement slow, deliberate. When she looked down, his face was close, too close. Strands of hair clung wet to his skin. His eyes searched hers.

“I know you’re hurting,” he said. “But we will find it. We will destroy it.”

Her insides twisted sharply with the want to believe. The fear of it. Her breath hitched. She blinked fast, forcing the tears back where they belonged. Her hands clenched into the damp fabric of her sleeves.

Lysander’s gaze lingered on her face, then shifted away. He stood, the motion fluid, controlled.

“You should've a warm bath,” he said. “Before the chill takes you.”

She wanted to argue, to tell him she didn’t deserve warmth, but the words didn’t come. She nodded, a broken motion.

Lysander hesitated a moment longer. Then he turned towards the bathroom.

Idonea watched him through the blur of her lashes.

After pumping hot water into the tub, Lysander stayed only long enough to test the temperature.

He returned and extended a hand.

Idonea ignored it. She pushed herself up, legs unsteady, but she refused to lean on him. Her body protested every motion, but she kept her chin high.

Idonea hesitated at the threshold.

“I’ll be outside,” he said.

She gave a curt nod and stepped inside. The door shut behind her with a solid click.

Steam curled around her, coaxing warmth into frozen limbs. She stripped down, piece by piece, peeling off layers heavy with sleet. Her fingers were stiff.

She lowered herself into the bath, breath catching as heat met cold. Her body tensed, then eased by degrees. The ache in her muscles softened.

But the warmth couldn’t touch what ached deeper.

Idonea tilted her head back against the edge of the basin and closed her eyes. The daemon’s sigil burned behind her eyes.

She tried not to think of the girl on the chapel steps. The hand raised, frozen. The smallness of her under the snow. She tried instead to think of nothing: of the heat against her shoulders, the wet shape of her hair against her neck, but the mind goes where it likes. It went to Dyota.

Not the day. Not that day. Idonea had learned, years ago, not to let it go to that day. Dyota had been four. They had been in the bath together, and Dyota had wanted to wash Idonea's hair and Idonea had said no, because Dyota washed hair like an angry crab, all grip and no rhythm. Dyota had pouted. Then, with the genius of a child too young to argue, she'd sunk down to the chin in the water and refused to come up until Idonea agreed. Bubbles around her nose, one eye visible above the waterline, accusing.

Idonea had laughed, sharp and against her will, and given in. The fingers in her hair had been clumsy. The water had gone cold. Nellith had come in eventually and found them both with their fingers gone wrinkled,

Dyota humming tunelessly, Idonea's scalp aching from her sister's terrible careful work, and Nellith had said *out, both of you, you're turning into raisins*, and had wrapped them each in a separate towel and carried Dyota out into the kitchen on her hip while Idonea trailed behind dripping.

Dyota had smelled of the soap their mother made then. Rosemary and something else, something Idonea had been too young to name. She had tried before, in the years after, to place it. The lack of the word for it sat in her like a missing tooth.

The bath water lapped against her own collarbone. She didn't open her eyes.

She was four — She made herself stop the thought there. Anything past that was speculation. Speculation was worse than not knowing.

Her hands floated, pale and trembling. Another girl dead, another failure.

Her thoughts raced. Nellith. The relic. The daemon. It had to be connected. Her lips parted for a breath that shook.

The door creaked.

She twisted her head, water lapping up the rim. “I—”

It was Lysander. He didn’t come in, not fully.

“I brought dry clothes,” he said.

Her eyes narrowed. “And you’ll stay with me?”

He didn’t look away. “No one ordered me to.”

She sat upright in the water, arms crossed just beneath the surface. “Then why?”

He leaned a shoulder against the frame, expression unreadable.

Her throat tightened. “I’m not breakable.”

“No. You burn.”

The words landed somewhere beneath her ribs. Idonea hated that she'd no immediate answer for them.

His gaze drifted down the slope of her throat to where water glimmered against her skin, then back up to meet her eyes. They stared at one another across the threshold, thick with the slow tilt of recognition.

“I’ll wait outside,” he said again, quieter this time.

Idonea stared at the space he'd filled. She let herself sink lower in the water, lips just above the surface.

His words hung in the air, unsettling as the memory of his hand around her earlier. She hated that part of her had found comfort in it.

Lysander had left a nightgown. A clear direction that she should sleep.

She stared at the soft fabric, her pulse quick with unease. As if she'd be foolish enough to rest while time waned. Every second they spent here was a step closer to something worse.

Still, she dressed. The nightgown clung lightly to her damp skin, the hem brushing her calves.

Lysander waited by the hearth, arms folded, a subtle sheen of exhaustion across his face. His eyes met hers briefly, before they drifted downward, tracing her shape without shame, without apology.

She lifted her chin. "I need something else to wear."

He gestured towards the bed. "Those might be better."

Her gaze followed, finding practical clothing waiting.

Idonea changed into the clean clothes laid out for her: a plain black tunic lined with fur, and warm woollen trousers. She'd never worn pants. There were new boots that hugged her calves.

When she emerged, Lysander had already moved the table aside and opened the floor hatch. He reached into his shirt and drew out a silver chain, a key glinting at its end.

"We'll have more luck leaving out of Alcaeus' house," he said.

Then he turned and held out a dagger. He held it out, hilt-first. He wouldn't meet her eyes.

The blade was a hair's breadth wide, needle-slim from hilt to top. Its hilt was wrapped in dark linen over a core of tightly grained oak. The blade was narrow enough for close work. Fast, precise, and made for slipping between ribs.

She turned it over in her hands, using the second to take it in. "Does Alcaeus know?"

He shook his head. "But I know it is something you need."

He didn't elaborate, and she didn't ask.

Down in the basement, Lysander gave back her belt and satchel. After affixing both, he led her down a narrow passage that smelled of wet stone.

Near the end of the tunnel, unease rose through her ribs. Pressure gathered between her shoulder blades. Idonea resisted the urge to look behind her.

"Idonea?" His voice pulled her forward.

She shook her head. "Nothing." She exhaled and pressed forward. "Let's go."

He unlocked the hatch and pushed upwards. The old hinges groaned, and cold air spilled down like a wave. He offered his hand, and she took it blindly, letting him pull her into the dim stillness of Alcaeus' kitchen.

She swallowed, recalling Kitsa's words. "Is there a back door?"

He nodded, already turning. She followed him past the laundry room, into the night. The air bit at her skin. *No sleet, thank the stars*. Lance flew down from the roof, a shimmer of scales and muscles, his tongue flicking the air. He landed beside her with a hiss.

She smiled, quiet and sincere. "Hello." His presence calmed her, though his presence here likely indicated he found no trace of the daemon.

"Stay low," Lysander murmured. He moved first, slipping into the shadow between two buildings. She followed, keeping her steps light, thankful the snow muffled everything. Twice he raised a hand and stopped her, waiting as a patrol passed by. He probably had the patterns memorised.

They reached the trees. Snowmelt dripped from the branches and damp moss coated the rocks. Idonea pulled her cloak tighter, its weight sodden with cold, but she didn't complain.

The further they walked, the quieter it became, until it was just the hush of their breath and the low crunch of snow beneath boots. Even Lance's wings were silent overhead.

The fjord was a narrow, glacial ribbon of black water, flanked by sheer rock walls slick with ice. A cold wind coiled up from the depths, carrying the scent of brine.

She tilted her head back and drank in the stars, the cold air harsh in her lungs.

"Now what, witchling?" Lysander asked.

Witchling. She should hate the way he said it.

Instead, it settled under her skin, warm, albeit infuriating.

Lance hissed, circling high and then sweeping back towards her shoulder. She pulled her dagger free.

"Now," she said, "you keep watch."

Lysander unsheathed his sword. A soft rasp of steel and silver.

She sat in the snow. The ritual would need more than a shallow offering.

Teeth clenched, she sliced across her arm.

She held out her arm. "Lance."

She closed her eyes as he bit down on the open wound. As his jaw released, Idonea pulled on the Current. Her pupils slit, nails lengthened, and the wind shrieked.

Current pulsed around her, drawn by blood and pain. She tugged at its threads, twisting them, binding them, feeding the daemon scent Lance offered through the bite.

A ripple crossed the Current. A pulse, and it was strongly distorted.

Her jaw clenched as she pulled at the Current. She'd have her answer. It pulsed strongly towards the town.

Her concentration fractured as Lysander's voice cut through her trance. "Idonea!"

She severed the connection, eyes jolting open.

A sound split the air, soft, like metal dragged through snow. It stepped from the dark. Half-formed. Its body unravelled as it moved, edges bleeding shadow, the shape flickering between smoke and sinew. No eyes. No mouth.

It lunged.

Instinct guided her hand. She slashed open her palm, blood welling hot against the cold, and with a single flick of her wrist, she whispered the word that ignited it.

Crimson light hissed from her fingertips. The droplets flared and burst into a gust of burning force, striking the daemon square in the chest. It staggered back, limbs twisting like a spider's legs.

The backlash hit her a heartbeat later. Her pulse skipped, a wave of dizziness rolled through her skull.

Lysander was already moving. His sword sang, its silvered edge catching the daemon's writhing silhouette. When he struck, the sound was wrong, like flesh and shadow tearing at once.

Lance screamed above them, wings slicing the air.

The Current pulsed beneath her skin, calling for more. The blood still spilled down her wrist.

She raised her bleeding hand and traced a rough sigil in the air, voice hushed.

The spilled blood glowed crimson, the sigil spun into being before her, every line pulsing in rhythm with her heart. The daemon jerked as if caught in invisible chains, its form flickering faster, thrashing against the Current that caged it.

The nausea came sharp and fast, roiling in her gut.

Lysander advanced, blade flashing again. His strike met the daemon's chest. The creature's form collapsed inward, folding into smoke, dissolving until nothing remained but a streak of dark frost.

Silence swallowed the world. The only sound was the patter of her blood on the snow.

Idonea swayed, breath becoming ragged.

Lysander's eyes swept the tree line, his jaw tight. "Where did that daemon come from?"

She wiped her dagger against her trousers, smearing crimson into black cloth. "It didn't kill those girls."

Lysander sheathed his sword. The sound was steady. "And did you get what we need?"

"The trace is strongest within the town," she said, frowning at the direction they'd come. "But how could it hide there? With that many Templars watching?"

He tilted his head back, studying the sky. "Then we try something else."

Blood still trailed from her palm. He noticed, stepping closer, but she turned away before he could offer a cloth.

They began their return through the trees, the snow whispering beneath their boots. The Current's hum still echoed faintly in her chest, her heartbeat a fraction too slow.

Neither spoke again, but Lysander's gaze flicked towards her, words unspoken in his look.

They went back through Alcaeus's house the way they came, down into the basement.

Her hand throbbed, blood still sluggishly seeped through the bandage she'd hastily wrapped. She ignored it. The ache was deserved.

The hatch creaked as it lifted open into the cottage.

Lysander climbed up first. She followed and froze halfway out.

Alcaeus sat in the chair by the fire, a book open in his lap, though he wasn't reading. His gaze fixed on them. He didn't stand.

"Welcome back," he said. "Took the long way home, I see."

Idonea straightened, the ache in her arm forgotten. "Why are you here?"

His eyes moved to Lysander. "You were ordered to keep her *here*."

Lysander didn’t answer. His expression didn’t shift, but the muscle in his jaw flexed.

Idonea stepped forward. “You know the daemon is not mine.”

Alcaeus sighed and shut the book. “The Magistrate has summoned a Grand Templar. Whatever is killing those girls is feeding. It’s anchored itself somewhere deep.”

She stiffened and glanced at Lysander’s stoic form. “Then why not tell me earlier?”

“I suspected,” he said. “You’re strong enough to track something slipping between planes. And if you’re right about this relic … then it must be near.”

“Then Nellith is near.”

He raised his brows. “Yet she has not helped.”

“Because they *have* her.”

Alcaeus stood, moving to the door. “Once the Grand Templar arrives, I’ll be unable to protect you.”

Idonea swallowed hard. Her mind spun. “How long?”

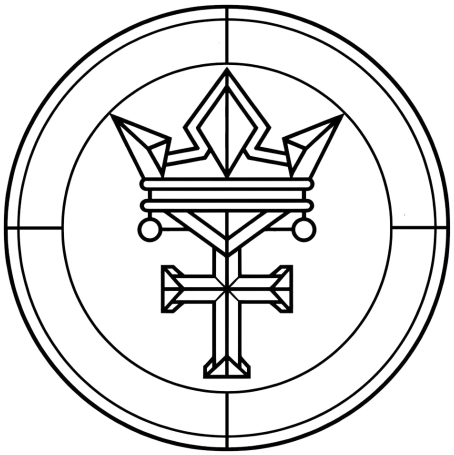
“A few days,” Alcaeus said. “You’ll have to work at night. The other Templars, the Magistrate, they all will expect your confinement.”

He paused, hand on the door. “And Idonea, tend to that wound. Get some rest.”

Lysander followed Alcaeus out the door. Idonea waited for the lock, but it never came.

Because he came back.

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Chapter 19

Lysander filled the doorway. The fire had burned low enough to leave most of his face in shadow.

“You shouldn’t let it bleed,” he whispered.

She glanced down at her hand. The bandage was dark through. “It doesn’t matter.”

“It does.”

He crossed the room with soundless but certain steps, and she stilled. When he reached her, he took her wrist in both hands. Gently, but firm enough that she couldn't pull away.

“Sit.” The word wasn’t an order, but she obeyed. The chair creaked beneath her weight.

He knelt before her, fingers deft as he unwound the soaked bandage, and the smell of blood thickened between them. The cut on her palm was deep, crimson welling again as the linen peeled away.

Lysander frowned, drawing a clean cloth from his belt. He didn’t ask permission before cleaning it. The water stung, hot against torn skin.

She hissed, flinching, causing him to still. “I know,” he murmured.

“You’ve done this before,” she said.

“Enough times.”

He bound her palm again, slower this time, tighter. His touch was steady.

When he reached her forearm, where the older cut still leaked faintly, he hesitated. “This one, too.”

“It’s fine,” she said.

He looked up. “It isn’t.”

Something tightened low in her chest when he looked at her like that.

He wrapped it anyway, the bandage brushing the inside of her wrist where her pulse jumped against his knuckles.

She swallowed hard. “I don’t need you to—”

“I know,” he said. “But I’m doing it.”

He tied the last knot neatly, then sat back on his heels. The fire crackled.

“You’re still cold,” he said at last.

“I’ll manage.”

He reached up, brushing his thumb along the edge of her sleeve, testing the warmth. “You shouldn’t have to.”

Idonea looked away immediately. That sort of kindness always came with a price eventually.

He rose and crossed to the hearth, adding another log.

“Rest, Idonea,” he said without looking at her. “You need your strength.”

Her gaze remained on him a moment longer, her hand throbbing in its new bindings. As she settled onto the bed, his shadow shifted across the room toward the window.



Everyone was gathering into the long hall.

Lysander’s hand ghosted at her back, never quite touching, but close enough to steer her through the press. His presence was steady.

At the head of the hall, Alcaeus sat. The hall fell silent as he rose.

“Unfortunately,” he began, “one of our own was murdered.”

A sharp breath rippled through the hall.

“As such,” he continued, eyes sweeping over them all, “Sacrosanctity is now in effect.”

Hushed whispers broke out among the witches, with mothers tucking their younger children closer.

Idonea’s gaze darted through the crowd and caught on Edik. He was pale, ghastly so, with hollowed cheeks and sunken eyes.

The Magistrate stood, but didn't speak immediately. His hand rested on the table too long.

"Brother Alcaeus and I have discussed this at length," he said. "I have not been in full agreement. The southern rotations are already strained. Removing the children means removing their mothers, and removing the mothers means we lose two-thirds of our active hands within the day. Quotas will not be met this season. The Order will ask why."

"The Order will be told the truth," Alcaeus said evenly. "There is a daemon."

"And the Order will ask whose oversight failed to contain it." The Magistrate looked at Alcaeus for a long beat. Then his gaze swept across the witches in the hall. "I have lodged my objections. They are noted. Brother Alcaeus has overridden them."

A silence. "Those under age, and mothers, will depart today for Rusegrad. Meet at the stables by midday."

He offered his hand to Elzhbeta. She rose from her chair, her face composed, and they both walked out, silent.

Rusegrad was a town within Valadova, a country bordering both Zorya and Velzarija.

A collective murmur surged, but no one protested. A flicker of warmth broke through Idonea’s fear. Relief. At least the youngest would be safe.

Around her, the hall shifted into slow chaos.

Lysander remained by her side. Idonea leaned in, keeping her voice low.

“What’s Sacrosanctity?”

Lysander didn’t look at her, not at first. He stared at Alcaeus, his expression unreadable. “The Templars are in charge, out-ranking the Magistrate, and any other laws.”

Her heart stuttered, a sudden and unwelcome rhythm. “Why, with a Grand Templar on route?”

His mouth curled. “Because he wouldn’t come unless it was.”

The hall was nearly empty now; only the parentless witches remained. The old enough, the expendable.

Idonea swallowed against the rising dread. If it had been her choice, she would’ve sent them all away. No one needed to be here.

Alcaeus scanned the room. “The rest of you will relocate to the terraces along the square. A curfew will be enforced. No one leaves their quarters without an escort.”

His eyes landed on Idonea. Every gaze turned towards her. Waiting to see what she'd do.

She waited, too. Waited for someone, anyone, to object. No one did.

The witches bowed their heads instead. They murmured assent.

Lysander's shoulder brushed against hers. "They're too afraid to speak," he said under his breath.

She looked at him, the sharp lines of his face. She tried to decipher the line between his loyalty and his defiance.

And worse still, her body reacted to his nearness before her thoughts did.

Alcaeus dismissed them with a wave of his hand.

Idonea stood, eyes tracking Kitsa's retreating form. She would find her later, and ask for another lesson. It might help lead her to the relic without drawing attention from the Nexis.

Specifically, Vinea's attention.

Since Alcaeus had yet to mention the sigil, Idonea hoped that meant he remained unaware of which daemon it belonged to.

She exhaled through her teeth. She turned to Alcaeus. "Can I leave?"

He nodded. "You may. Remember what I said."

She slipped out of the hall. Lysander followed without a word.

Outside, the square lay hushed under a crust of snow. She caught sight of Kitsa's slight form disappearing into the right-most terrace.

Templars tracked her steps. She'd ask Kitsa without delay. She crossed the square. The terrace loomed tall, built of dark timber. The opening room was a communal space of high ceilings with soot-stained wooden beams, and snaking copper and brass pipes. A massive cast-iron stove anchored one end of the room.

Idonea climbed the stairs into a narrow hallway, lined with doors set close together. The floorboards groaned underfoot.

One door lay open, and Idonea peered in. Velvet drapes in dark red hung from an iron rod before a lone window. Two beds sat in opposing corners, spartan but neat.

"Idonea," Kitsa said, laying a book upon one of the beds.

"Hi," Idonea said, stepping into the room. "Claiming a good spot first?"

Kitsa shrugged, a wry tilt to her lips. "Someone had to. I'll fetch my things soon."

Lysander remained at the threshold, arms folded loosely.

“I have a favour.”

“Me?” Kitsa blinked, brows rising.

Idonea smiled. “I’d like to learn more about Resonant ways.”

Kitsa exhaled through her nose. “Alright. But not here. The walls have ears.”

She moved past Lysander. He fell into step behind them as Kitsa led the way back down the stairs and across the terrace’s communal space. She stopped at the far end of the larder, where a heavy hatch sat flush with the floorboards, half-invisible unless one knew where to look.

Kitsa knelt and swept aside a dusting of flour to reveal the iron ring.

Idonea glanced back at Lysander. His face gave nothing away.

Kitsa pulled the hatch open with a low groan of metal, exposing a tunnel.

Kitsa led her through the passage, thick with cobwebs and the scent of rusted iron and root rot. They emerged into a circular chamber, dusty from misuse. Kitsa set down the lamp on the floor.

“This is safe,” Kitsa said, kneeling. “Mostly.”

“How do you know about this?” Idonea asked.

“This is where we first stayed when we arrived two years ago,” she replied.

Idonea knelt across from her, trying to still the shiver in her limbs. Lysander remained standing, leaning against the wall, not entering the chamber.

“Resonant magic isn’t about control,” Kitsa said. “It’s alignment. You don’t command the Current, you tune to it.”

Idonea frowned. “Tune?”

Kitsa reached forward and placed two fingers on Idonea’s sternum. “Here. The vibration of you.”

“Sounds like nonsense,” Idonea muttered, heat prickling her neck.

Kitsa smirked. “It is. Until it isn’t.”

She leaned back on her heels. “Let’s try simple. Tethering. Feel the presence of this space. Let it feel *you* in return. Don’t force. Align.”

Idonea nodded. “Like creating a connection for the plants?”

Kitsa nodded.

Idonea closed her eyes. If she mastered this tethering, perhaps it was a gateway to anchoring a location to Vinea.

The dark pressed in. She reached for the Current, but not as she usually did, but through breath. Through stillness.

Her breaths deepened, slowing. Threads of the Current shimmered at the edges of her thoughts.

The space pressed around her: the cold stone, the faint echo of Kitsa's breath, the quiet vigilance of Lysander waiting behind her.

Then, a pulse. Like a distant heartbeat beneath the floor. Not hers or Kitsa's. Something older. A thrum that vibrated through her bones. Her skin prickled as the chamber's subtle rhythm brushed against her own pulse.

She tried to coax the space's Current towards her. But the moment her intent sharpened, the luminous threads recoiled like startled water. She inhaled sharply, the Current snapping away from her touch.

"What?" Idonea looked down.

"It retreated," Kitsa said. "Because you reached with will instead of resonance."

A flush of frustration warmed Idonea's throat. "So, I failed."

"For the first attempt?" Kitsa said, tilting her head. "No. The Current noticed you."

Idonea's gaze lifted.

Kitsa's eyes widened. "Your eyes."

Lysander stood from the wall, his boots shuffling over stone.

Idonea splayed out her hands, showing the lengthened nails like claws. "A mark of my Current access."

Kitsa looked troubled. "I've never seen such a thing."

"Likely because I am Riven." Idonea's mouth twisted.

"But…" Kitsa glanced towards Lysander then back. "I've seen Rivens work before. None ever exhibited that."

Silence stretched between them. The faint hum of the Current remained. It was subtle, but constant. Idonea's features resumed their normal state.

Kitsa's smile sharpened. "If you attune to a place, you can attune to people. Relics. And if you're good, you can manipulate that resonance. Shift it."

Idonea's mouth went dry. "To what end?"

The girl leaned in. "A skilled Resonant can unravel someone's mind like thread."

“And the Order claims the light sanctifies Resonant magic.” Idonea shook her head. No matter how a witch practised, they could be dangerous.

“They never teach us such things,” Kitsa said.

“Thank you,” Idonea said quietly. “This was helpful.”

Kitsa didn't stand yet. She stayed on her heels opposite Idonea, her hands folded loose in her lap, her eyes still on the floor.

"Idonea."

"Yes."

"Edik has been asking the other witches things."

Idonea lifted her head. "What things."

"About his sister." Kitsa's voice had quietened. "He asked Cleo what she'd said the night before. He asked one of the older women what the sigil meant. He asked Lidiya—" She caught herself. "I don't know what he asked Lidiya. She doesn't say. But she let him into the larder for a long time and they were not making bread."

Idonea sat with that. "He hasn't asked you."

"No." Kitsa's mouth flattened. "He won't speak of her to me at all. He looks at me and then he looks away. I think he means it as protection. I think he believes whatever he is gathering is dangerous to be near."

"He may be right."

"I know." Kitsa swallowed. "I don't want him to be right. I want him to come and sit with me and weep for his sister the way he should. He cannot. He is doing something else. With his grief. Building something out of it."

Idonea didn't answer at once. She thought of Edik in the hall earlier, pale to the point of being unwell, the hollowed cheeks. Of how she'd not spoken to him. Of how no one had, since his sister's death.

"I'll watch for him."

"Don't ask him questions." Kitsa met her eyes. "He won't answer. He'll only know I told you. Just watch. If he is going to do something stupid, you will see it before I do."

"All right."

Kitsa nodded once and stood. “Happy to bring you back here again.”

When they climbed into the open, the cold slapped her cheeks. The sky remained pitch-dark, polar night’s unbroken shroud. She found herself wishing, fiercely, for sunlight.

Her gaze swept the gloom until she spotted a hint of movement overhead. Lance, circling like a silvered shadow.

Across the square, Templars watched her openly. Their pentoculars whirred and clicked as lenses focused, adjusted, tracked. But none moved to apprehend her.

Idonea turned towards her cottage, cloak pulled close, the sting of the lesson still thrumming beneath her skin.

Lysander followed, silent and steady at her back. Back inside the cottage, Lysander pushed the dining table aside.

“It is not yet night,” Idonea said.

He raised the hatch. “No, but I have an idea.”

She arched an eyebrow and followed him down the narrow steps. The basement air greeted them, chill and metallic. Lysander lit the sconces one by one.

Then he crossed to what she’d assumed was solid masonry. He slid a brass key into a near-invisible seam.

She wondered whether he meant to reveal a hidden passage. Instead, he stepped back.

A ceiling-to-floor sheet of Lodamante metal slipped down with a muted, decisive hiss. Then a second one followed, sealing the surrounding space. They now stood in a narrow chamber of polished silver-blue walls.

“Lysander…”

“Never fear, witchling,” he said. “This reverses the Lodamante dampening. Try it.”

She licked her lips, testing the surrounding air, relishing it when Current caressed and pulled against her. Idonea nearly made a sound.

Lysander turned towards the cluttered worktable. Copper cogs, broken clockwork, thin coils of wire, and glass vials lay scattered across it. A few pieces clattered to the floor as he sifted through them with renewed energy.

“I think I can make a device to track a daemon’s energy,” he said, glancing up at her.

Her forehead creased. “Would that be possible?”

“With your help, yes.” He stepped around the table. “If you’d be willing?”

She looked away. Her fingers toyed unconsciously with the ring on her hand, the one he’d given her in this very basement.

But helping him create an Order device? Helping Templars?

“Is it wise?” Her throat was tight with conflict.

“It could save lives,” he said. “Yours included.”

Her breath faltered. He wasn’t wrong. Witch or no, daemons could still slip the Nexis, and ordinary humans had no real defence against them.

She closed her eyes briefly. “Okay,” she said, “what do I have to do?”

His shoulders relaxed marginally. “Now, I observe.”

“Then, I’ll need things,” Idonea said. “I’m no Resonant. So, we’ll do a ritual.”

Lysander gave a slow nod. “Name it.”

She hesitated, wondering if this was a trap. “I’ll need a black candle, a mirror, and bone dust. They should be in my supplies.”

“Okay,” he said, “stay put. I won’t be long.”

Idonea sat on the floor to wait, enjoying the free access to the Current.

True to his word, Lysander returned and spilled the contents out in the space before her. He then set up a device nearby.

“Now what?” he asked.

Idonea drew a slow breath. “Now,” she said, “don’t interrupt me. And don’t touch anything.”

He nodded once.

Idonea uncorked the vial of fine white bone dust. She pinched a handful and lowered it, letting it cascade between her fingers as she traced a perfect circle around her knees.

Once the circle was complete, she unwrapped the mirror and set it gently in the centre. Its surface reflected nothing.

She pricked the pad of her fingertip with her dagger, its needle point parting her skin with surgical ease. A bead of crimson welled up. She let it fall into the ash in her palm.

The mixture sizzled faintly, Current pulling towards it.

Idonea dipped two fingers into the paste and pressed it to her sternum. The touch burned cold.

She smeared the remainder across her lips, metallic and bitter.

Idonea set the candle before the mirror. Her hands moved without hesitation as she sparked it alight. Shadows crawled up the walls.

The Current responded immediately, coiling around her spine.

She reached for the bone dust again, but this time she dampened it with a smear of her blood. With surgical precision, she traced the sigil upon the stone, just outside the circle: Vinea’s sigil.

The symbol pulsed once, dim and sickly.

Lysander shifted infinitesimally, hand dropping towards his sword hilt.

“Hold,” she murmured. “It’s only the ritual.”

Idonea placed both her hands flat on her thighs and drew a long breath in through her blood-smeared lips.

The Current surged through the circle, through her blood, pulling at her ribs like invisible fingers.

The mirror fogged, a flicker cutting across the glass. Then a disturbance she'd not expected. Her pulse staggered.

Someone was blocking the daemon’s signature. A *witch’s* energy.

The glass of the mirror cracked.

Her eyes flew open. The ritual was broken, but she still had to seal it.

She pressed a drop of blood to the flame. It snapped out with a hiss, releasing a puff of grey smoke.

Idonea swayed.

Lysander moved instinctively, but halted just short of touching her. “What happened?”

The beginnings of a headache throbbed in her head. “Someone is masking the daemon.” Her nose itched, and she wiped her hand across her nose, coming away with a trace of blood.

His jaw tightened. “Someone here?”

She lifted her gaze to him, the Current still dancing behind her pupils. “I can’t be sure. But we must be getting close. Too close.”

He bundled up the device. “I don’t like the sound of that.”

Her legs vanished underneath her. One moment standing. The next not.

Lysander darted towards her, catching her underneath the shoulders.

“How do you feel?” he asked.

Her eyelids were heavy, and she struggled to keep them open. The ritual shouldn’t have drained so much of her energy.

“Sleep is in order.” She pressed her hand against her forehead. “Before my head splits open.”

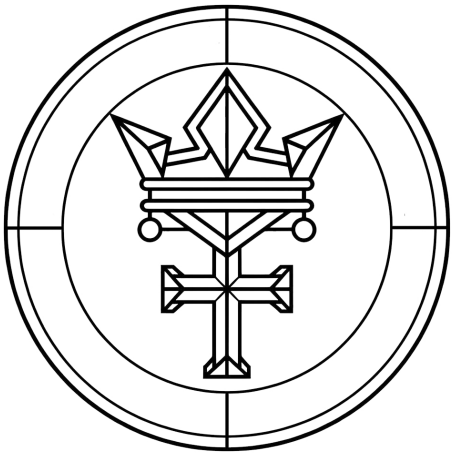
“Agreed.” Lysander steadied her onto her feet.

With Lysander’s steadying presence behind her, she went back up the stairs and straight to the bedroom. She collapsed onto the bed, the scent of blood clinging in the air.

“You’ll stay?”

His voice was soft. “Of course.”

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Chapter 20

The cold had come in overnight. It pressed against the windowpanes from the outside and against the back of her neck from the bed. A beam cracked overhead. The cottage had been settling around her for days. Tonight it sounded louder.

Her head ached. The ritual had taken more out of her than she'd admitted to Lysander the night before. She lay on her back and watched the silver veins of Lodamante in the beams. They caught what little light came through the curtains.

She thought about the pulse.

In the chamber below the larder, when Kitsa had been teaching her to tune to a space, there'd been a thrum. Older, Kitsa had called it, without naming the thing. A heartbeat beneath the floor that belonged to neither of them. Idonea had sensed it once and lost it when the lesson moved on. It had stayed at the back of her mind since.

Whatever was beneath the chamber was older than the chamber. She wanted to know what.

She wouldn't get the thought clear in this cottage. The Lodamante pressed against her thoughts, muffling her very capacity to think. The pulse was below the chamber. She needed to go down.

She didn't call for Lysander. He'd gone somewhere in the early morning; the cottage was empty. Easier this way. What she had wasn't yet a plan. It was the edge of one, and it wanted quiet.

She dressed. Wool, dagger at her hip, her satchel. The square was empty in the grey light. She drew her hood up and slipped out, glad for the absence of Templars at the watch.

The terrace door was unbarred, so she let herself in. The communal space held only the smell of old stew. The witches must be at chapel, or the fields. She crossed to the larder, lifted the hatch, and went down.

The tunnel was as she remembered. Cobwebs at the entrance and root rot in the cold air. She moved through it, her lamp throwing long shapes against the curve of the walls.

The chamber opened after a few minutes' walk.

She had been here twice. With Kitsa, for the lesson. With Kitsa and Lysander, for the deeper one. Both times she'd looked at the centre, at Kitsa, at the lamp on the floor, at the bench where she sat. She hadn't looked at the edges.

She set her lamp on the bench and walked the wall. The stone was older than the village above. Older, she thought, than Krylovan had any right to be. Marks ran along it at eye-height, scored into the rock by hands she couldn't name. Witch-marks, but not Templar ones. Not Kitsa's, either. Older.

The pulse hummed faintly through the soles of her boots when she stood quite still.

It was below her.

She walked the wall, the lamp raised, looking for what she'd have looked for in any old building. A gap, or seam. A piece of stone set in later than the rest.

She found it at the far side of the chamber, opposite the entrance.

A doorway not concealed. The lamp Kitsa had brought had been low and central, and the far wall had stayed in shadow. The doorway was a low arch, the stonework older than the chamber's. The chamber, she realised, had been built into the side of an older descent. The first witches who'd used this room had walled themselves in. Sealed off whatever was below.

She lifted her lamp and stepped through the arch.

The passage went down. Not steeply. Just enough that her body shifted on each step. The walls were unworked stone, weathered by air that had moved through them a long time. After a hundred paces, the passage opened.

The second chamber was round, low-ceilinged, smaller than the one above. A stone bench ran around the curve of the wall, polished by years of sitting bodies. A hearth in the centre, cold for what looked like generations. Soot stains on the wall above, dark and so old they had become part of the stone itself.

The walls had been carved deeper than the chamber above. The marks didn't run in a tidy circle here. They were scattered, written over each other,

layered by hands across decades. Some she half-knew. Some she didn't. Some had weathered past reading.

In the centre of the wall opposite the entrance, set at the height of someone sitting, was a single mark deeper than the rest.

A dragon-eye, slit-pupiled. Weathered nearly smooth.

She stopped, crossed the floor and stood a hand's breadth from it.

The stone around it had been touched by generations of fingers before hers. The wear was old. The mark was older than Nellith. Older than the Order in this region. Older than the version of Krylovan she knew.

Nellith's mark, then. Or, no. Nellith's was a copy. The ring on Idonea's own thumb was a copy of a copy.

Her hand was shaking. She didn't know why at first. Then she did.

She set her lamp down on the bench and sat. The scrape of a boot on stone came close, very close, but she didn't jump; her eyes stayed on the dragon-eye.

"Idonea."

"How did you find me?"

"Lance." Lysander's voice was steady, tight at the edges. He stepped into the chamber, his lamp adding a second shadow to hers. "He came to the cottage door and wouldn't stay. Followed me to the terrace. Kitsa was there. She said you find new floors in houses you have not been told all of, and pointed me down."

Idonea's mouth twitched. "That sounds like her."

"It did."

He stopped a pace from the bench. His eyes went to the carved wall. To the dragon-eye. To her hand resting in her lap. Whatever moved across his face, she couldn't read it.

"What is this place?"

"A meeting room. For witches. Older than the chamber above. Older than the Order." She paused. "The mark on the wall was my mother's. Or my mother's was a copy of this one. I don't know which yet."

He studied the carving without speaking. "Old work."

"Yes."

He sat down on the bench beside her. Not close enough to touch. Close enough that the stone between them lost its bitter chill.

The lamps threw a slow trembling pattern across the wall. Water dripped somewhere in the passage above. Nothing else moved.

After a while, he said, "I came below the chamber once."

She turned her head.

"Before they brought you here. Not this far. A few hundred paces and I turned back. The Order doesn't walk where it hasn't consecrated. First thing they teach a Severant. The unconsecrated dark talks to you, if you let it. So we don't go in."

"But you did."

"Once."

"I had killed a man. I wanted to ask the dark whether it had anything to say about him."

"Did it?"

"No. Or — yes. It said the same thing the Order had said, and I came up still believing the Order, and I have been believing the Order for nine years."

She watched him in the lamplight. "How old were you?"

"He'd trained me. With the blade I used on him."

"That isn't what I asked."

"I know." A pause. "Nineteen."

"And the man?"

"Twenty-three. A Severant. The Order said he'd broken. Killed two of his own unit and run north. I was on the team they sent after him. Youngest." He paused. "He didn't fight."

Silence settled heavily between them.

"I have been thinking about him this winter, witchling. More than I used to."

"Why this winter."

"I don't know yet. Something in your face when you ask me questions. Something in the way you don't look at me when I drink from the flask. He drank too. He drank for years. And then one winter he did not, and the Order said he'd broken, and I went north with three other Severants and I put a blade in him while he stood still and let me. I have not asked, in nine years, why he was standing still."

The chamber grew deathly quiet, the air biting colder. "Lysander."

"I don't know what I am telling you. I don't think I am telling you anything yet. I am only — saying it out loud. Here. Where the Order does not go."

"Because?"

"Because this is a place where witches once met. And I am sitting in it. And I am not yet certain what that means about me, but I would rather find out underneath this village than above it."

Her throat tightened. "I am glad you said it."

"Yes."

"Even if you don't know what it means yet."

"Yes."

The lamplight caught the brass at his elbow. She thought of him, climbing out of these passages with nothing changed, the work above ground still waiting.

She wanted to touch his hand. She didn't. The pulse in his wrist showed, a steady beat against the lamplight.

"We should go up," he said.

"Yes."

He stood and offered her the good hand. She took it. His fingers closed around hers, warm and certain, and she rose. The lamplight moved across the dragon-eye on the wall behind them.

They left the chamber together.

The climb back was quiet. Through the upper chamber, the passage, the larder, up into the terrace's communal space. The witches were either at chapel or in the fields. They crossed the square in the late morning light without being seen.

Halfway across the square, Lysander's hand drifted to his coat — the motion she'd seen perhaps a dozen times now, the silver flask coming up to his mouth and away again. This time he didn't bring it up, instead his hand closed on the shape of it through the fabric, paused, and dropped. He didn't look at her, and she didn't say anything.

Lance was waiting at the cottage door. He hissed once, a mild rebuke, and climbed onto her shoulder without ceremony.

Inside, Lysander barred the door and went to the hearth without speaking. Idonea sat at the table.

Her hands were cold. She thought of the carving and the old hearth and the women of her line who'd once warmed themselves in a room she'd now stood beside.

She thought of Lysander, too. The pulse in his wrist. The thing he hadn't said.

A knock came at the door near dusk.

Idonea's head snapped up from the table, her pulse leaping.

Lysander rose smoothly to answer it, one hand drifting to the hilt of his sword.

Alcaeus stood outside, his cloak still snow-flecked. His face wore the closed look. He held something wrapped in dark wool against his chest, the way a man holds a thing he hasn't decided he can give up.

"May I?" he asked.

Idonea rose from her chair, her chest tight with sudden, inexplicable dread. "Yes."

He stepped inside. Lysander withdrew to the hearth and took his coat with him, giving them the room without making a show of it. A flare of unexpected gratitude shot through her for the mercy of it.

Alcaeus stood at the centre of the floor a moment, as if he'd forgotten how to be in this cottage. Then he crossed to the table and set the bundle down. The wool was old and softened from years of handling.

"This was hers."

Idonea's heart stuttered.

She didn't move to touch it. "What is it?"

"A book. One of her workings-books. From before we were married." He didn't meet her eyes. "I kept it when I left her. I'm not certain why. I haven't opened it in years. I thought, last night, that you should have it."

The world tilted. *Nellith's book. Something her mother had written in. Something her mother had touched.* Her throat closed around the wanting and the fearing of it, both at once.

"Why now?" The question came out barely above a whisper.

"Because Kitsa came to me at midday." His mouth was thin. "She said *Idonea has gone below the chamber and you should know it, in case Lysander does not find her in time.*" He drew a slow breath. "Kitsa knows what you've been doing. I would rather give you what I have before you find your way to the rest of it without me."

Idonea swallowed hard. Her fingers were trembling. "Have you read it?"

"Some. I stopped."

"Why?"

"There were things in it I didn't want to know."

She stared at the wool. Her hand hovered over it, not quite landing. "What things?"

He didn't answer. The silence stretched between them, brittle and full.

She made herself speak. "Alcaeus."

He was already at the door, his hand resting on the bar. He paused. "Yes."

Her throat ached around the word. "Thank you."

He nodded once, and let himself out into the cold without looking back.

Idonea stood at the table for a long moment after he'd gone, her pulse hammering against her ribs. The lamp guttered. Lysander stayed at the hearth, present without speaking, giving her the space the moment needed.

She unwrapped the wool.

The book was leather-bound, and the spine had cracked from handling, the corners gone soft from years of being held. She opened the cover with trembling fingers.

Her mother's hand ran across the first page in the narrow, precise script she'd known her whole life. The familiar slant of the letters hit her like a blow to the chest. *Stars.* Her vision blurred. She blinked the tears back, fiercely.

She turned the pages with care, hardly daring to breathe.

Workings. Observations. Lists of plants. A long passage on the ethics of taking from the dying, written in a younger hand than the marginalia.

Then, half-way through, on a page about vessels in older witch usage—

A margin note in Nellith's hand.

The body must be prepared, not used. A working that uses an unprepared vessel will burn the vessel out before completion. Patience is the only virtue.

And below, in the same hand:

Five marks. Five years. Sooner ruins it. The last one took three. A waste.

She read it once, the words blurring at the edges. Then again, slower, forcing herself to take in every careful letter of Nellith's narrow script.

The candlelight wavered. A cold, creeping dread spread through her chest, settling deep behind her sternum. She knew her mother's hand. She knew the precision of it, the way Nellith never wrote a word she didn't mean.

This is theoretical, she told herself, the thought desperate and thin. *Just old notes. Just study.*

But the lie wouldn't take. Her own back ached suddenly, every mark Nellith had inked into her spine flaring like remembered fire.

She closed the book with shaking fingers, her thumb caught between the pages, and lowered it to the floor beside the bed. Her breath came shallow.

Across the room, Lysander stirred at the hearth.

"Idonea?" His voice was soft. Careful. "Are you—"

"No." The word came out broken. "Don't ask me yet."

He didn't push. He simply turned back to the fire, giving her the silence she needed.

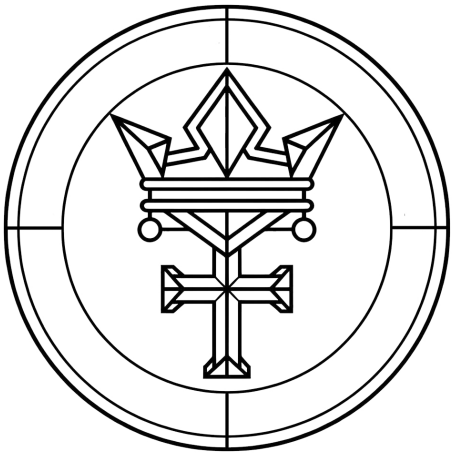
She lay down on the bed without undressing and stared up at the silver veins of Lodamante in the beams above her. They glinted dully in the dying lamplight, like cold stars.

She would read more in the morning, she thought, when she'd slept. When she could bear it.

Lysander, sometime in the early hours, banked the hearth and let himself out. Lance went with him.

She slept eventually. Not well.

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Chapter 21

Idonea rubbed grit from her eyes, pushing sleep back with the heel of her palm. Her fingers fumbled along the bedside table until they found her glasses. The room sharpened painfully into focus.

Her sleep had been thin and full of voices she couldn't place by morning. The grimoire still lay open on the floor where she'd set it. She'd close it before he came back.

Her brow creased. A subtle sound tugged at her attention, water, gently lapping.

She padded towards the bathroom, the boards creaking underfoot. The door was closed.

She knocked once. “You in there?”

Silence. Her pulse ticked strangely in her throat.

“Lysander?” she tried again.

Nothing. A sick coil tightened in her gut. She pushed the door open a crack, the hinges whispering.

“Lys—”

She froze. Her stomach dropped so hard she nearly lost her footing.

She pushed the door fully open with numb fingers.

The tub was filled to the rim, water a cloudy, murky red. His throat had been opened nearly ear to ear. Blood clouded the water dark around him. His right arm dangled over the porcelain’s edge, flayed from the wrist to shoulder in long, precise gashes.

“L—”

No sound came out.

She took one staggering step closer before she saw his face.

Not Lysander.

Edik.

His head had fallen back against the tub. His mouth had come open. Not wide. Just enough that the inside of it showed dark, and one of the lower row of teeth was wrong in a way she couldn't name in the moment.

His eyes stared glassy and wide towards the ceiling, to the sigil scorched black above the tub. Vinea’s mark. Carved deep into the ceiling timbers.

She pressed a hand to her mouth, a sobless breath shaking through her.

Whoever did this wasn't warning her. They were laughing. A blatant disregard for the Lodamante’s stranglehold on Current in the cottage.

A daemon couldn't have entered this room. Couldn't have stood there. Couldn't have lifted a hand against a Lodamante-warded threshold. The thought arrived in her like a hook, snagging in her ribs before she had time to set it down somewhere safe.

Someone had been in this cottage. Someone had done this with hands. Not claws, or Current. Hands.

She tore her gaze from the sigil long enough to register the details.

Edik’s fingers were pruned. He’d been in the water long enough for the warmth to leave. His skin had the waxen pallor of true death.

He’d been alive only yesterday. Her throat constricted painfully.

She backed out of the bathroom, hand gripping the doorframe so hard her knuckles whitened. The cottage spun.

Where is Lysander?

She forced herself towards the front door. She tested the latch, not locked.

A cold prickle ran down her spine. Lysander said he’d stay nearby, that he’d watch.

Her gaze drifted back towards the bathroom, to the body slumped in red water, to the carved sigil.

“A grim mess,” she whispered.

The cottage door creaked.

Cold air swept in, and purposeful footsteps crossed the threshold. Lysander had his coat’s collar turned up against the chill.

He stopped the moment he saw her standing there, barefoot, hands trembling at her sides. His gaze flicked over her, as if checking for wounds.

“Idonea,” he murmured.

Something in his tone cracked her chest open.

But she couldn’t speak. She only stepped aside, letting him see what waited beyond the bathroom door.

He moved past her, and when he reached the doorway, he froze. Lysander’s breath left him in one harsh exhale.

He stepped inside the bathroom, careful not to disturb the water. His boots made no sound on the stone. He crouched to inspect the lacerations, the angle, the depth. His jaw twitched.

“This wasn’t self-inflicted.”

Idonea’s throat burned. “I know.”

He didn't stand yet. He held his hand a finger-width above the cleaved throat, not touching, tracing the line of it in the air.

"This was done with care."

The word landed wrong against the rest of the room. Idonea didn't understand it.

"What?"

"The wound." Lysander's voice was very level. "It's clean. The pressure was even. Whoever did this took their time."

He moved to the arm. The long, precise gashes from wrist to shoulder. He held his hand over them the same way. "These too. Each one of these was a separate stroke. Made carefully. With a blade."

"Lysander."

"I know."

He rose, head tilting up to the sigil. “And that—” The muscle in his cheek twitched. “That shouldn’t be possible.”

Lysander turned to face her, his grey eyes steady. "Someone wants this to look like the daemon. Someone wants us to keep looking outside the village for who did this."

The cottage was very still.

"Who," she said. Her voice was thin.

Lysander didn’t answer. He stepped out of the bathroom, shutting the door behind him. He faced her fully.

“Did you hear anything?” he asked.

“No.”

“You didn’t wake?”

She shook her head. Shame pressed heavy on her ribs. “I … I should’ve sensed it.”

His gaze softened. “No witch could sense anything within the Lodamante in the walls. That’s the point.”

He stepped closer. His hand twitched as if to reach towards her, but he held it still, hovering in the space between them.

“Idonea,” he said, “are you hurt?”

“No.”

He exhaled, long and controlled, and ran a hand through his hair.

She was shaking. She hadn't noticed when it started.

“Don’t look anymore,” he said.

But she did. She looked at that closed bathroom door, at the faint red smear on the stone where water had overflowed.

She had seen death before. But not like this.

“Lysander … what are we going to do?”

“We’re not going to say anything.”

She hadn't expected that. “You want to hide it.”

“I want you alive.” His eyes hardened, voice low and controlled. “A death marked with that sigil, drawn beside a Riven witch, they will not believe innocence. Not yours.”

A beat of silence stretched.

“So, we hide it,” she said.

“We hide it,” he echoed.

He unbuttoned his coat, shrugging out of it. Her pulse thundered, but she nodded.

Lysander went to gather what they would need. He rolled up his sleeves and opened the bathroom door again. The blood-smell hit her. She hadn't braced for it.

“Stay by the wall,” he said. “I’ll handle the body.”

Idonea pressed her sleeve to her nose, hating herself for the reflex. She forced her breathing to remain calm.

Lysander drained the bath with slow finality, the water sucking downward in muted gurgles. When the tub emptied, he lifted Edik’s body with care. The mechanical arm bore most of the weight under Edik's hips. The other kept the boy's head from falling back. He had carried the dead before; he'd a method.

He paused. "His hand."

Idonea looked. Edik's right was curled, the fingers drawn in tight against the palm. The flaying ran up the arm to the shoulder, precise and

terrible, but the hand at the end of it had remained closed.

Lysander lowered the body back enough to free the hand. He pried the fingers open one at a time. Idonea saw his jaw clench at each one.

Dirt fell into the bottom of the tub. Dark, granular dirt that came from places that didn't see much sun. It was chapel dirt. Where Arina had died.

"It's from the chapel," Idonea said.

Lysander looked at her. "How do you know?"

"It's the same colour. The same, it's the same as what was beside her body. The sigil. Whoever drew the sigil drew it in this."

Lysander didn't answer.

"He went there," he said at last. "After. He went and gathered it."

"Why?"

"I don't know. To carry as evidence. To compare." He stopped. "To take a piece of where she died. I don't know."

Idonea remembered Kitsa in the chamber below the larder. *He is doing something else. With his grief. Building something out of it.* She had not, until now, understood what Kitsa had meant.

She closed her eyes briefly. The cottage spun and steadied.

They wrapped Edik in linens, clean ones. He didn’t let her touch the body, not out of distaste, but protection.

“I’ll take him,” Lysander said. “Open the hatch.”

They descended into the basement. She walked ahead, leading him to the furnace in the far corner. A massive cast-iron maw used for scrap metal and repairs.

She paused before it.

Lysander set the body down, and she rested a hand on the linen-covered chest.

“Lament him, Current. Let his spirit free from the confines of a bodily prison. Let the winds mourn and carry the tears to rain. He is unburdened. Let him be swept free.”

Lysander touched her shoulder. “Ready?”

She nodded. He lifted Edik one last time, laid him into the furnace, and pulled the heavy lever that fed it air.

The flames roared to life, white-hot, consuming the linens first, then flesh, then bone. The smell thickened in the air.

Idonea covered her mouth.

They stayed until there was nothing left but fine grey ash.

Lysander shut the furnace door. “We’ll scatter what remains in the fjord tonight,” he said. “Before anyone notices he’s gone.”

Idonea looked up at him. “And the cottage? The sigil?”

“I’ll clean it,” he said. “You shouldn’t have to.”

They climbed the basement steps in silence, sealing the hatch behind them. They took opposite seats by the hearth.

“How many daemons?” she asked, staring into the flames. “How many have you fought?”

He leaned back, gaze fixed on the firelight, tracing shadows along the beams overhead. “Daemons of rank? The one.” His gaze drifted up to the beams overhead. “Lesser entities … at least a dozen.”

Another silence, heavier this time.

“An archduke?”

Lysander’s expression didn’t shift. His left hand flexed. “A duke.”

Daemons of rank were rare occurrences.

Her gaze dropped to his mechanical arm. “They claimed your arm.”

Lysander was silent for a long time. “A price I gladly paid.”

Her breath caught in her throat. “Perhaps we aren’t so different,” she said. The admission settled badly within her.

He stood, crossing the space between them. He knelt before her.

“Perhaps, witchling,” he said. “But never forget what we are.”

The world narrowed to the space between them, the moment stretching. A knock shattered it like glass.

Idonea jerked back, pulse spiking. Lysander straightened instantly.

“Idonea?” came Kitsa’s voice from the other side.

Lysander shut the bathroom door before pulling the front door open. A gust of wind and snow burst in.

Kitsa’s face bore a wide smile. “Morning.” She stepped inside, letting Lysander close the door behind her.

Idonea stood from her chair. Only then did she look down at the dried flecks of blood on her sleeves. Edik’s blood.

Kitsa didn’t notice. She looked between them, smile unwavering. “Would you like another lesson?”

“Can I meet you in the same chamber?” Idonea swallowed hard. “I just … need a moment.”

Kitsa nodded, still cheerful. “Of course.”

“She hasn’t eaten yet,” Lysander added.

Kitsa’s eyes softened. “Then take your time. I’ll wait in the chamber.”

She slipped out as quickly as she came, leaving swirling cold in her wake. The door shut.

Idonea and Lysander stood in the silence once more, the fire cracking faintly behind them.

“I need something clean,” she said.

Lysander nodded towards the bedroom. “Some of your other outfits were laundered. In the closet.”

She went and changed, tucking the torn relic page back into her clothes. The risk of someone finding it had increased. Though she doubted anyone else could read it, it wasn’t a chance she was taking.

Dressed in clean clothes, Idonea left and made her way to the terrace where Kitsa now stayed. Other witches lounged in the space and stilled in their motions at Idonea and Lysander’s appearance.

Idonea didn’t let her gaze linger on any of them for too long; any of them could be the one blocking the daemon signature. Though they were so young. It didn’t seem plausible.

She made her way to the larder, and Lysander opened the hatch.

The chamber was no longer bare. A couple of armchairs, a woven rug, and a set of shelves now sat in the space. Books sat proudly on one shelf.

Kitsa nursed a cup of tea while lounging in the chair.

She smiled at Idonea. “Cosy, right?”

“You did this yourself?” Idonea asked, taking a seat. Lysander, once again, stayed standing outside the chamber. Left lingering in the passageway.

Kitsa shook her head. “No. Others helped.”

Idonea glanced over at the books.

“You can take one if you want,” Kitsa said. “But keep it from the Templars.”

“That won’t be a problem.” Idonea wondered if they had something like a grimoire for Resonants.

Kitsa put her teacup down. “You want to try the same as yesterday?”

Idonea nodded. “But how do you attune yourself to another?”

“If you don’t know them, then you have to visualise them, or have a part of them,” Kitsa said, dropping from the chair and crossing her legs on the rug.

Kitsa looked over at Lysander. “Try with him.”

He arched a brow in response, but stayed silent.

Idonea wanted to try to connect to Nellith, but she supposed some practice wouldn't hurt. She pressed her hands down onto the floor beside her. "And?"

"Then," Kitsa said, leaning closer, "you watch the surrounding Current. Every person has a different tone, a different vibration. The Current reflects that. You don't tug it. You don't command it. You listen to it."

She pressed two fingers to Idonea's sternum. "When it aligns, you'll feel a second beat here. Like a faint echo of his heartbeat overlapping yours. If the attunement holds, that beat stays with you until you release it."

Idonea took a deep breath, letting her eyes slit and fall into pure Current Sight. Kitsa sucked in a breath. Even seeing it before didn't lessen the impact it had.

Idonea's perception shifted. The chamber dimmed, its edges blurring into a soft silver haze. Air thickened as if woven with threads she could brush aside with her hands. She exhaled, letting herself slip farther into the Current's luminosity.

A hum vibrated through her bones as Current shimmered in the space. The world around her bent. Lysander came apart into threads of light.

She recoiled. The resonance called to her. Careful not to pull, or force the Current, she aligned each breath with each pulse from his rhythm. Her heart stuttered, steadied, then aligned.

Her fingers twitched against the rug. A hazy ringing filled her ears. The light from his resonance brightened until it prickled against her vision.

She let her own Current unfurl like a hand reaching towards another flame. The moment the threads touched hers, the air tightened.

Idonea gasped. A second heartbeat fluttered beneath her sternum. A resonance not her own pulsed through her veins.

Idonea pressed a hand to her chest.

Kitsa broke into a wide grin. "You did it."

Idonea stood, steadying herself against the chair while her eyes and nails resumed normality. The thump in her chest unsettled her. Lysander's gaze met hers, his face unreadable.

Hoping it was as easy as Kitsa said, Idonea walked over to his position.

The secondary thrum beat faster, her own pulse answering.

She stepped right up to him, toe to toe. She tilted her head to look at him.

The secondary beat faded, quieting in her chest.

“Well?” Kitsa’s voice cut through the silence.

Lysander cleared his throat.

Idonea stepped back, turning to face her. “That’s impressive.”

Kitsa sat back up on the chair. “That’s the easier form of attunement, but well done.”

Instead of returning to the rug, Idonea went over to the books. She brushed her fingers over the spines, taking in the titles.

“I better be going,” Kitsa said from behind.

Idonea nodded, “Thanks again.”

Her fingers stalled over one spine. The title was in an unrecognised script. She frowned and pulled it from the shelf. She saw, with a quick flip through the pages, that the same unknown language filled the entire book.

But one of the other witches must’ve put it there.

She thought it similar to the script on her torn page, but with Lysander so close, she didn’t want to check.

Tucking the book under her arm, she made to leave the chamber.

Lysander grabbed her arm as she passed. “Why do you need a book on Thaalrun?”

Idonea looked from the book to him. “You know this?”

“I know it is the written form of Drakthaal.” His eyes narrowed. “The original language used for dragons.”

She hummed lowly. “Nellith never taught me.”

His hand fell away. “Does this have to do with the relic?”

“You mean the relic of a dragon’s heart?” She smirked. “The more knowledge I have, the better.”

She held the book out. “Can you read this … or you just know what it looks like?”

“The Order’s Archivists had some translations,” he said. “But I never learnt.”

She kept her eyes on him, watching the twitch of his jaw. The way his left hand flexed.

“While we wait for night, I’m going to study this.” She tucked the book back under her arm.

Lysander walked with her to the cottage but didn't go inside.

“I must see to other matters,” he said.

She looked back out through the door. “And the door?”

He sighed. “I must lock it. It’d be expected.”

Idonea gave a sharp nod and watched while the door closed, locking her in once more. At least she’d hear anyone’s entry; the door bar wasn’t silent.

She went over to the table, placing the book down. After a momentary thought, she pushed it aside. The hatch was heavy, her muscles straining to open it.

Alone, her boots rang against the steps, echoing louder. In the dark, she guided herself with touch against the rough wall. She lit the first sconce she came upon.

She checked if the hatch into Alcaeus’ was locked, and to her dismay, it was.

Back down in the hallway, she looked at the walls, and where the passage led. It didn’t add up. This space surely had to be more than a passageway. The houses were so close together.

She took a deep breath. She had to have missed something. The walls themselves gave up no more secrets. No more hidden panels. But those Lodamante sheets meant the basement was larger than the walls gave. They had to slide somewhere.

Idonea turned her attention to the wall sconces. She pushed her glasses up the bridge of her nose. The lamp she'd brought made little light against the stone, and the seams between the sconces and the wall were narrow. She would have to look closely. One by one, she ran her fingers along them, pushing and pulling.

It wasn’t until the final one, the one near the stairs to Alcaeus’, that she noticed it. A copper fixture jutted out below the sconce, small enough to be missed by a passing eye.

She pulled it down. The wall ground as it swung open, stale dust stirring and itching at her nose.

The dust was the least of her problems. The stagnant stench of old blood assaulted her senses.

Someone once slept in the secret room. A wooden framed bed sat shoved in one corner. A dampness pervaded the air.

Against her better judgement, Idonea walked in.

Leather strapping hung limply at the bed’s side. The featherbed dusted with mould. She rubbed the leather through her fingers, noticing the buckles forged from Lodamante. The strap fell away.

A heavy pit formed in her stomach.

Something was stuck in the stone on the wall. She leant over the bed. Her hand slapped over her mouth to halt the bile threatening to surge.

Delicate fingernails were wedged into the stone. Dried blood still coated the surrounding wall.

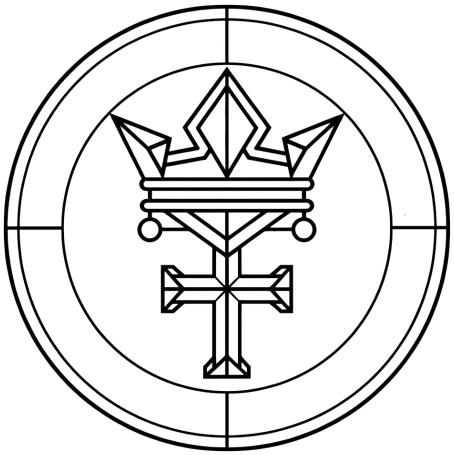
All the colour drained from her face. She took a shaky breath, stepping backwards.

She fled the room; it sealed behind her.

Something unthinkable had happened in that room.

And the nagging feeling eating away at her told her Alcaeus would know exactly what.

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Chapter 22

Idonea brewed a cup of black tea; strong, bitter, astringent enough to steady her hands. The fragrant steam curled around her face, grounding her breath. She carried it to the table and lowered the hatch again.

She sat as the tea warmed her palms, even though the rest of her stayed cold. She kept her eyes away from her fingernails.

The Thaalrun book lay open before her. Its title winding across the cover in serpentine script, a language that looked cut into the page rather than written.

With a brief glance towards the locked front door, she slipped the torn relic page from her clothes. She smoothed the brittle parchment beside the book.

The characters matched.

She flipped through the book page by page, finding no hidden translations in the margins. Only the same indecipherable strokes repeating across hundreds of pages. Patterns that made her temples throb if she stared too long.

She found similarities between her page and the book, but nothing that revealed meaning.

Idonea had just taken another swallow of tea when the front door was unbarred with a heavy scrape.

Lysander stepped inside, frost clinging to his cloak. His eyes cut immediately to the table, then to the torn page.

“What is that?” He didn’t come any closer than the door.

Idonea’s grip tightened around her cup. “A page on the relic. But it’s written in Thaalrun.”

He inched towards her. “May I see it?”

“You said you didn’t know the language.” She lifted a brow, suspicion rising like a tide.

Lysander’s jaw tightened. “I said I never *learned* it. But I’ve seen enough to recognise certain structures.”

She drained the rest of her tea, set the cup down, and nudged the page towards him. “Well?”

Lysander hesitated before picking it up. He studied the strokes and gave her a searching look.

Then, with a faint exhale, he read aloud:

“Born of wyrm’s blood and Current’s storm,
the heart that rends the worlds as one.
Within this crystal sleeps the gate—
a passage wrought by death and fate.
Hold fast the key, and fear the call,
lest shadow break and kingdoms fall.
No mortal hand should wake this flame,
for chaos burns without a name.”

Cold spread through her. Her chair dragged as she stood, drifting to his side.

“Lysander…” She swallowed. “And that—” she motioned sharply to the page “—is what’s inscribed on the keystone?”

But another thought struck her then. He read it, fluently, without faltering.

Her gaze snapped to him, alarm flaring in her chest.

“You said you didn’t know the language,” she whispered.

“I said I never studied it.” His eyes remained on the parchment. “But I have been exposed to enough relics to piece together fragments.”

Her insides tightened painfully. She'd stopped expecting lies from him. That was the dangerous part.

“Is it nightfall?” She folded the page back up.

Lysander touched near his neck, where the key lay hidden. “What is the plan?”

“Alcaeus said the daemon is hiding deep,” Idonea said, “and everything I’ve sensed places it, or the relic, somewhere nearby.”

“Basements?” Lysander pushed the table aside, lifting the hatch.

She frowned, her chest tightening, an echo of the failed ritual. “No. Somewhere deeper. Darker.” Her voice dropped. “Something older.”

Her stomach twisted. A witch’s resonance had blocked her search last night; someone from among their own.

Idonea regretted the isolated existence she'd led on Draugaros. If she'd had more experience, those children wouldn't have died. Her throat thickened.

"Witchling." Lysander stood partway down the stairs. He pulled her from her spiralling thoughts.

She avoided his hand and made her own way down. She'd bury such thoughts. They couldn't help.

They slipped out into the night. The clouds were swollen, smothering the sky in a sheer, suffocating black. Snow drifted in quiet sheets, muffling each sound.

Idonea scanned the empty lanes, only a few Templars lingered near lampposts.

"I need to get near the terraces," she said. If the daemon was anchored beneath one of them, she needed proximity.

Lance's eyes found hers, and she nodded.

"We'll go behind." Lysander motioned for her to follow.

He didn't mention anything about what might be deeper than the basements, but if any of the terraces had passages like the one Kitsa stayed in, it could be a possibility. Especially since the town was far older than him.

As they slipped behind the cottage and cut across the narrow lane, a movement caught Idonea's eye. A tall figure stood framed against the frost-clouded window of the Magistrate's quarters. Elzhbeta stood motionless behind the frosted glass, like she'd been waiting there. Idonea thought Elzhbeta was looking directly at her. The hair on Idonea's arms tingled, an instinctive bristling beneath her skin, but when a drift of snow blew across her sightline, Elzhbeta was already turning away. Idonea brushed off the quiet unease stirring in her ribs and followed Lysander through the snow.

They reached the first terrace in silence. Idonea positioned herself close to the old stone wall, while Lysander waited several paces back, eyes scanning the shadows.

The cold bit at her skin as she drew her new dagger. Riven magic always demanded its due. She angled the blade and pulled a shallow, practised line across the side of her neck. Heat bloomed instantly, her blood welled up, dark and thick.

Idonea pressed her fingers to the cut, feeling the sting flare, then set her blood-slick palm firmly against the brick. A tremor passed through her arm.

She shut her eyes and opened herself to the Current.

The world narrowed to a single throb. A second pulse answered, her own blood calling back.

She tried something new: weaving the Resonant attunement she'd practised earlier with the raw, scorching pull of the Riven cut. Her heartbeat synced, then stuttered, then stretched thin, current rippling beneath her skin.

Her eyes slid open into a silvery shroud of Current Sight. Light poured in steady waves across the terrace stones, luminously fluid. White strands drifted through the silver, and within them, faded hairline streaks of black.

Idonea drew harder. The Current thickened, pushing back against her palm with molten heat, as if resenting being bent. She fanned it outward, combing through every thread, searching for the oily distortion of daemon presence.

Nothing. Not even a tremor.

She hissed under her breath and severed the connection, the recoil snapping against her ribs. Her knees wobbled. The cut on her neck burned hotter.

At the second terrace, she repeated the ritual. Again at the third. Each attempt dragged heavier through her limbs, thickening her blood with heat and fatigue. Her nose prickled, the familiar warning before it bled, and her vision pulsed at the edges.

Lance emitted a low hiss and flew down from the rooftops. He circled Idonea twice.

"Yes?"

He nudged his head against her hand with Nellith's ring.

Idonea lifted her hand to look at it.

"Is there something special about it?" Lysander asked.

"He's connected to it," she said, "somehow."

Lance continued to nudge at her hand. He'd bruise her soon enough if he persisted.

"Pest," she muttered. But she couldn't ignore him.

She slipped the ring off her finger and rested it in her open palm.

Lance hissed sharply before snatching it up in his jaw. He circled Idonea again before shooting up into the sky.

Idonea started after him, sucking in a deep breath. "Maybe he'll find Nellith."

"Or…" Lysander trailed off.

She shook her head. “No!”

Lysander reached for her, but she tore away from his hand, shoving past him and running. Any direction, just away. Away from the terraces. Away from Lance’s empty sky.

She ran until the neatly cut stone paths gave way to uneven woods. Snow-laden branches whipped at her coat. Frost-crusted hares bolted from their burrows as she crashed past, breath breaking in sharp bursts. The cold bit at her lungs, but she didn’t stop.

Her thoughts clawed her, jagged, frantic, spiralling.

The Current still simmered beneath her skin. It made every thought harsher. Every fear louder. Every shadow deeper.

Her body gave out.

Idonea stumbled, then fell to her knees, snow exploding around her in a powdery halo. The cold soaked through, but it was barely anything over the pulsing fire in her blood. She threw her head back and cried out. No tears came. Her eyes burned dry.

She screamed instead until her throat was raw and the world swam around the edges.

When her voice failed her, silence pressed in. Her breath hitched, each inhale shuddering. Her fingers curled in the snow.

The cold soaked up through her clothes and into her thighs and she didn't feel it the way she should have. There was only the slow flat absence the screaming had left in her chest.

Her mind, too tired to spiral, slipped somewhere else.

To the chapel steps. To Arina on the chapel steps with the sleet making thin pink rivers down to the gutter. To the way Arina's mouth had fallen open, the lower lip slack against the stone. To her own fingers against the cool point of Arina's jaw and the wetness they had come away with, and how she'd told herself it was snow.

To Edik in her own bathtub. To his head fallen back against the tub. To his mouth a little open, dark inside, *one of the lower tooth was wrong in a way she couldn't name*.

Her breath caught. Two mouths. Both open.

Why was she thinking about the mouths?

The cold had reached deeper than she'd realised. Her hands were beyond shaking. She pressed them harder into the snow, but her numbed skin gave back no sensation.

A hand rested gently on her shoulder.

Idonea flinched, her head snapping up, but it was only Lysander.

He didn’t speak at first. He sank down into the snow beside her with subdued weight. His coat brushed hers; his breath misted close by. He lifted a hand and brushed away a snowflake caught on her eyelashes.

Her eyes slid closed. “What if Nellith is dead?” Her voice cracked on the last word.

His sigh misted through the cold. “Witchling. You don’t believe that.” He paused. “Not deep down.”

“I…” Her fingers went to her collarbone, pressing against the faint thrum of her own pulse. The heat of the Current still flickered there. “I don’t know what I believe right now.”

Her spiralling thoughts whispered the same refrain:

You failed her.

You were too slow.

Too weak.

You should've found her sooner.

You should've been stronger.

Lysander shifted closer, his presence a silent anchor. “You’re worn thin.”

She let out a trembling breath.

He stood and held out a hand. “Come. Let’s return. You need to keep your strength.”

Idonea stared at his hand. Then, she reached up and took it.

They didn’t need to take the basement passage back. The Templar stationed near the shed had vanished, footprints half-filled with fresh snow. Idonea didn’t question it. She didn’t have the strength to.

Lysander opened the cottage door, and as Idonea stepped over the threshold the world detonated inside her.

Something opened in her belly. She folded around it, a horrific, unrecognizable sound tearing from her throat.

Before she caught herself, her knees slammed into the floor. The impact shot up her legs, but it barely registered over the searing agony threading through every nerve.

Lysander cursed and slammed the door shut behind them.

Bile surged up her throat. She gagged, dry retching. Tears blurred her vision, hot and useless. Numbness tingled through her limbs like a swarm

of needles.

A steady hand pressed between her shoulder blades.

“What’s wrong?” Lysander’s voice was slow.

Idonea tried to speak, but another heave tore up her throat, leaving only acid and a strangled rasp. Her fingers splayed against the hardwood as she fought to stay upright.

Her ribs were too tight. Her skin burned from the inside out.

Lysander swore again and swept her up into his arms. Her head lolled against his chest, sweat slicking her hairline despite the cold.

He carried her towards the bathroom, knelt, and set her gently on the tiles. The stone bit cold through her clothes, grounding and nauseating all at once. She curled forward, panting.

“Speak to me, witchling.” He pumped water into the tub with quick, efficient movements, his jaw tight.

She swallowed hard, tasting acid. Her throat convulsed; she spat onto the tiles, unable to hold it back.

Lysander didn’t flinch. If anything, his movements grew sharper, urgency overtaking calculation.

He picked her up and lowered her into the tub, clothes and all. Warm water enveloped her, soaking through fabric, creeping into skin. It dulled the agony like a balm poured over burning coals. Her muscles unclenched one by one.

Her breathing steadied. Her hands stopped shaking.

“Idonea?”

Her head jerked towards him, the last flicker of pain pulsing behind her eyes.

“I…” she rubbed at her throat. “Check near the door. For markings. Or … anything.”

His brows drew together, but he didn’t argue. With one last lingering look, he slipped out and closed the door.

Idonea pushed herself upright. Her clothes heavy to her skin. She stripped them away with shaking fingers and eased back into the water. Her heartbeat slowed to something steady.

He knocked at the door. “You need to see this.”

She stepped from the tub, dried, and tightened the towel around her, its edges damp.

The hearth crackled as she exited the bathroom. He was crouched near the front door, one knee to the floor, one hand braced on the frame.

“Well?”

He didn’t look up immediately. When he did, she noticed the twitch in his throat. He swallowed, gaze flickering over her once, then returned to the doorway.

She stepped closer. Kneeling beside him, she was aware of the space between them. He shifted subtly.

Marked in the bottom corner of the doorway was a sigil. Not Vinea’s, something else.

“What…” she murmured, brushing a finger near it.

His eyes lingered on her. “You’re trembling,” he said.

She turned to him, eyes narrowing. “You’re staring.”

He didn’t deny it. She pulled away, rising to her feet.

“I need salt,” she said. “And don’t touch it.”

He stood too. “I won’t.”

Idonea turned, walking to the bedroom to dress first.

In dry clothes, and armed with salt, Idonea returned to the front door. Lysander stood nearby, leaning against the wall. His expression guarded.

She sat, resting the dagger on her lap.

“So, what is it?” Lysander asked.

“You don’t recognise it?” Her eyes narrowed. “It’s a severance sigil.”

“But the Lodamante,” he said, “already severs you from Current without that reaction.”

“No.” She exhaled, slow and controlled. “Because the sigil isn’t meant to sever someone from the Current.” A beat of silence. “It’s meant to sever the soul.”

The words hung heavily in the air. Lysander’s left hand flexed once.

She carved shallow grooves around the sigil, circles, and lines to hold a wall of salt. The physical act stabilised her. She packed salt into the grooves, her movements methodical.

“When the door closed,” she said, voice tight, “it disrupted the sigil. Stripped it of power. Whoever placed it here, counted on it having time to work. They didn’t expect someone else to enter with me, to interrupt it.”

Lysander pushed off the wall. His boots paced a short, uneven line behind her.

She didn’t look back.

“I had no ill effects,” he said.

Her hands stilled. “Because it wasn’t for you.”

He crouched beside her, closer than she expected, but she shook her head sharply before he reached for her.

She struck a flint and set the salt alight, burning the sigil’s power away.

Idonea cleaned the knife and tucked it away. “Done.”

“You should probably sleep.”

She shook her head. “Soon.”

“Then, to the basement,” he said.

Down in the basement, Idonea couldn’t help but stare towards the hidden room. Goosebumps travelled down her arms as she recalled the fingernails.

Lysander moved to a table, sweeping aside gears and copper fragments with the flat of his arm. “Instead of tracking the daemon,” he said, “we create a warning device. Something that reacts when it gets too close.”

She stepped closer, watching him sift through an assortment of brass plates, wire coils, and odd Lodamante fragments.

“Like an alarm?” she asked.

He nodded. “But I first must craft one. You’re welcome to watch.”

There were no chairs, only scattered tables and crates. He hunched over his work; a frown etched deep into his brow. Idonea crossed to another table and sat atop it, pushing aside a handful of metal pieces. They clattered to the floor. Lysander’s gaze flicked towards her, sharp and assessing, before returning to his tinkering.

With the Lodamante sheets extended, the Current was accessible. She reached out for it, the world around her buckling.

Suddenly, she no longer sat across from Lysander.



Cold air, stale and metallic, filled her lungs. The hidden room stood around her, the door sealed shut. But the space was warped, wrong, bathed in the strange half-light of Current-sight.

A figure was strapped down onto the bed, creating shivers that ran down her spine.

She moved closer. Dark hair spilled around the pillow. The girl's body twitched against the restraints.

Her head turned, and Idonea flinched back.

Corruption flowed through the girl's face. Her eyes were pitch black and her smooth, warm beige skin had black cracks spiderwebbing over it, disappearing beyond the neckline.

A nauseating familiarity stirred in Idonea's chest.

The girl's lips peeled back, teeth bared, a snarl ripping from her throat.

More than corrupted. Possessed.

A compulsion surged inside her to help.

Then the girl's expression flickered with sanity, then recognition.

"Idonea?"

Idonea's heart wrenched from her chest. The girl was her sister.

"Dyota?"

Screams echoed around her. The Current was severed.



Her eyes flew open and Lysander stood before her, his hand gripping her shoulders. The basement swam around them in watery shapes.

"What's wrong?" he asked.

Her throat burned raw. Her pulse thrashed. She shook her head, but the vision slammed against her mind again.

She couldn't breathe.

"I'm taking you to bed," he said, his brows furrowed.

Her blood turned to ice, her limbs stiff and numb. His arms lifted her, guided her up the stairs. Her legs buckled halfway and the sharp pain shocked her briefly back into her body.

A broken sound eluded her.

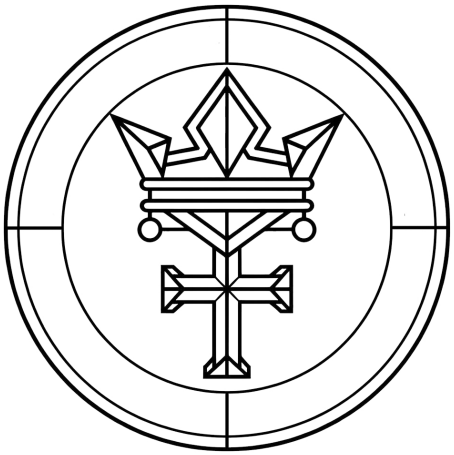
Lysander didn't leave. He helped her onto the bed, settling her against him as her body caved in with wrenching sobs she couldn't hold back.

Her mind kept showing Dyota’s face.

Idonea broke.

Lysander held her until the sobs turned to trembling. He didn't speak. In the long silence, his chest rose and fell in perfect sync with hers, guiding her back to calm.

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Chapter 23

A dull throb pulsed in her head as she pushed herself upright, the bedding cold against her palms. The space beside her was cold as well. Lysander must have left long ago.

On the dresser lay a fresh outfit. It consisted of dark brown pants and a long-sleeved black fur-lined coat that fell to the ankles, with large silver buttons down to the waist; an outfit designed to cover any hint of scars.

She dressed, every movement mildly disorienting; part of her was still in the vision. The memory of Dyota's blackened eyes threatened to surface again, but Idonea shoved it down.

When she stepped from the bedroom, she found a teacup and copper bowl of buckwheat porridge topped with winter apples. Idonea only sat when the front door opened again.

Lysander strode in, cloak dusted with snow. "You've been summoned."

Her fingers tightened over the teacup. "The Grand Templar is here?"

"You'll see what approaches on the horizon," he said, and gestured to the door.

She swallowed. He didn't say no, or yes. She took a quick sip of the tea before following.

The wind stung her cheeks the moment she stepped outside. The already darkened sky deepened, shadows crawling towards the town centre. An airship drifted towards it, and there was no sign of Lance.

As soon as they neared the fountain, Alcaeus called out, "Lysander, up on the stable roof to secure the anchor."

Krylovan wasn't built to accommodate an airship regularly.

Kitsa stepped up beside her. "Never seen one here before."

"A Republic ship?"

She nodded, lips pressed thin. A shudder slid down Idonea's spine.

The witches were gathering in cautious clusters. The Templars hovered, restless as they scanned the square. On the far edge, she spotted Elzhbeta. She watched the airship's descent with a stillness that was not shock, but calculated.

A prickle stirred at the back of Idonea's neck.

Lysander scrambled up a ladder onto the stable’s roof. Snow drifted off the shingles as he hauled himself over the edge.

Kitsa pulled at her hand. “Let’s go closer.”

Idonea allowed herself to be pulled, though her stomach tightened with every step. A nearby Templar immediately shadowed their approach, posture rigid.

Above them, thick ropes uncoiled from the belly of the airship, dropping down. Lysander moved with deliberate confidence, catching the first rope and hooking it through a metal ring embedded in the beams. He braced his weight and pulled, calling out to Alcaeus, who strode towards the stables.

Idonea’s gaze lifted to the vessel looming overhead. Its silhouette resembled the Clockwork Crows’ craft, except this one gleamed. Gold filigree curled across the hull in sharp, ornate arcs. It didn't look like something meant for travel. It looked like something meant to impress—or intimidate.

The underside of the ship split open, a wooden platform descended with ropes levering it at each corner. Snow whirled around it, caught in its downward draft.

Kitsa’s breath hitched. “Look, it’s just one person.” She bounced on her toes.

She couldn't feel what Kitsa felt.

Lysander, now crouched near the platform’s landing point, steadied the ropes as it neared the roof. Alcaeus climbed the ladder to stand on the roof with Lysander. The platform came to a rest, but Idonea couldn’t hear what they said.

“Idonea,” Alcaeus called and waved her over.

Her eyes widened. Kitsa’s fingers released her hand, and leant over to whisper, “You’re strong.” Fear tightened slowly beneath her ribs.

She stopped at the bottom of the ladder and glanced up; she swallowed hard. Her eyes darted to the path leading out of town. Two Templars stood with straight backs.

Lysander appeared at the top of the ladder. “Do you need a hand?”

She clenched her jaw and took hold of one rung. The higher she got, the greater the unease settling over her. She squeezed her eyes shut, thinking of what would happen if she fell backwards — of what object would be waiting to impale her.

Hands clamped under her shoulders and pulled her up. She opened her eyes to see Alcaeus’ face pulled tight with worry. She wiped away a single tear and avoided looking back down at the ground.

The man on the platform was another Templar.

“Are you okay?” asked Alcaeus.

Idonea cleared her throat. “What are they here for?”

Lysander stood close, his hand resting near his sword, his face rigid.

“The High Hierophant has summoned your presence,” Alcaeus said. “I’ll come with you.”

She glanced up at the ship. “He can’t come down?”

Alcaeus shook his head. “Be civil, and it’ll be fine.”

“Promise you haven’t told him about the relic?”

“I’ve said it before,” Alcaeus said, “but I’ll do anything to keep you safe.”

She kept quiet and approached the platform. Her eyes found Lysander’s, but he glanced away. Idonea huddled in the centre of the platform and spread her feet shoulder-width apart. Her stomach lurched as they winched the platform up, keeping her eyes closed until all movement stopped.

In the airship’s belly where they stood was a vast expanse of nothing. A narrow wooden staircase led up and away from the area.

The Templar remained silent, and with Alcaeus behind her, she'd no choice but to follow. There was no Lodamante in sight.

She was escorted up two more flights of stairs, each step becoming narrower. The Templar stopped before a gold-plated door, guarded by another Templar. After a single, heavy knock, the door swung inward. They entered first with Idonea and Alcaeus following.

A long rug cut through the centre of the room like a blood-red path to judgement. The space itself looked wrong. Mirrors lined the walls from floor to ceiling, multiplying their reflections, making the chamber feel endless. Too many versions of herself looking back. At the far end sat a single high-backed chair, more throne than seat. In it, draped in the same

immaculate robes she'd seen before, lounged the High Hierophant. His stillness pulled a slow cold through her gut.

He flicked two fingers, and the Templar withdrew without a sound.

Alcaeus stepped forward. "What brings your Radiance here?"

"Current spikes have been detected here," the High Hierophant said, his eyes flicking over to Idonea. "And I hear a Grand Templar is arriving imminently."

"What kind of spikes?" Alcaeus asked.

Her eyebrows pinched together; daemons didn't generate Current.

The High Hierophant rose from his chair. "Something I'll discuss with your daughter."

Alcaeus' posture stiffened. "I'd like to be present."

"No." The High Hierophant stepped down from the dais. "You are dismissed, Brother. You will wait outside."

Alcaeus rested a hand on her shoulder before leaving without another word.

Idonea stared at the High Hierophant. "What is this about?"

"These Current spikes are interesting," he said. "They spike here, and a duplicate spike, hit back at the capital."

Her mind scrambled to make the connection.

Was that where the witch was, the one blocking the daemon?

"You know what is in the capital," he said, "don't you?"

Her eyes widened, her heart skipping a beat. The reform college. Dyota. By laws of magic, it couldn't be possible. But how did he know the family connection?

A smile crept over his face. "I thought so."

He clicked his fingers and the mirrors shivered. Their surfaces warped, light bent as if the glass was liquid. The air thickened, Current spiralling, coiling. Her mouth went dry. More than one witch was present in the room — hidden.

Pressure collapsed around her like a fist. She staggered; breath punched from her lungs.

"What are you doing?" Her voice cracked.

"I'm understanding." He clicked his fingers again.

The mirrors rippled, flickers of images reflected upon them. Current surged around her head, needling into her skull. A white-hot spike of pain seared her mind.

Idonea dropped to her knees, palms slamming hard against the rug. Tears sprang to her eyes, unbidden. She gritted her teeth and reached desperately for the Current, raw, like stepping barefoot onto shattered glass.

Another blast of pain ripped through her. She clapped her hands to her ears, though it did nothing to stop it. The sound came from inside her skull.

The images in the mirrors became clearer. A younger Idonea stood in the one before her. The pain ceased as a memory surfaced; it was the day Alcaeus left: the day he took Dyota.

At the sound of the door opening I raced down the stairs. Dyota must be home from the doctors. Father took her after another argument with Nellith. He wouldn't let Nellith mend her. She'd caught a nasty cold which Nellith didn't want to see her suffer from.

I reached the bottom step and Nellith stood there. She didn't even turn, instead grabbed at my middle as I tried to squeeze past. I squirmed and caught sight of little Dyota.

Her face broke into a grin. "Iddy!"

But father held her back as well.

"I'm taking Dyota," Father said. "She can't survive here."

I stared up at Nellith, tears brimming in her eyes. My bottom lip trembled as understanding washed over me. I was about to lose my sister.

"I won't come back," he said. "This is the only way."

Dyota looked between us all; she was on the verge of tears as well. I struggled more in Nellith's grasp, eager to pull Dyota into my arms and let her cry.

Like paper burning in a fire, Idonea's vision crumpled up on itself. The world under her feet shifted. At once, it was black and spat her back out.

A voice in the void whispered, "Deeper."

She cried in agony and collapsed in on herself.

The front door opened. I sat next to Nellith in the sanctum. I didn't jump up or move, not wanting to interrupt whatever Nellith was doing, yet my eyes kept darting over to the door.

My hands couldn't stay still, and Dyota and father's voices carried through the closed door. Nellith's eyes snapped open, and she looked down at me.

"You can go," she said, and waved her hand at me.

I grinned and scrambled up from the cushion. They were no longer downstairs. I raced down the hallway and found them both in Dyota's room.

Her face lit up when she spotted me. "Iddy." She held her arms open and waited. I stooped and pulled her into a big, smooshy hug, just how she liked them. She giggled in delight.

"Daddy is taking us on an adventure," Dyota said.

That's when I noticed him packing clothes away into a trunk.

"Nellith didn't mention it," I said and blinked up at him.

He stopped packing and looked down at me. "That's because she's not coming."

My bottom lip stuck out. "Then we can't go."

Dyota tugged at my dress. "But he said it'd be fun."

Footsteps moved along on the floorboards and Nellith stood in the doorway.

I pointed a finger at Alcaeus. "He said he's taking us somewhere and you can't go."

Nellith raised an eyebrow. "Come here, Idonea."

She stretched out her long fingers to me and I went straight to her. Her hand rested on my shoulder.

"Where do you think you're going, Alcaeus?" she asked.

He continued to pack the trunk with Dyota's belongings. "Away from you. These girls aren't safe with you. I know that now."

"And you'd think I'd let you?"

"He won't take us away?" I said, "Will he?"

Nellith shook her head. "He wouldn't dare."

His back straightened. "Yes, I would." He took two steps and picked Dyota up from the floor.

"Iddy?" she asked. Tears welled in her eyes.

"Put her down," Nellith said. "You don't want to test me."

"I won't let these girls be your next victims," he said. "I can't let you raise them only for you to use them."

My eyes widened, and I looked up at Nellith. "You wouldn't hurt me, would you?"

She shook her head and ran her hand down my head, flattening the hair against my neck.

"Of course not," she said.

“Let me go,” Alcaeus said, holding Dyota closer to his body. “If you won’t let me take both, let me leave with Dyota. There is a Templar in town.” She stiffened. “I told the barkeep to hand him a letter if I didn’t show up before nightfall. A letter that will lead him right here. And you know he’ll send a message to the Republic, and they will come in force and take Idonea away.”

“Fine,” she said. “Take Dyota. But if you ever return, or even think about touching Idonea, I will find you.”

“No,” I said and struggled under Nellith’s grasp. “You can’t let him take Dyota.”

“Iddy…” Dyota stretched her hand out to me.

Nellith picked me up from the floor and walked away from the room.

“Dyota!”

She carried me all the way down the stairs kicking and screaming for my sister.

The world swam and buckled once more. She didn’t want it to be true, but she was back in the secret room — back with a possessed Dyota.

It was no memory. She wasn’t entirely sure what it was, but she wanted to escape.

Dyota thrashed in her restraints, oblivious to her presence. Foreign cries of pain tore from her mouth. Each sound hard against Idonea’s ears.

Then Dyota relaxed. Idonea’s legs were melded to the floor; nothing could make her go closer. Even if she was her sister.

Dyota’s head lifted. “Is that you, sister?”

Her heart skipped a beat. She was fighting the possession.

Idonea stepped forward. “Dyota…”

The blanket hung half off the bed, exposing her bare arms and more of the corruption deep in her veins. Idonea stifled a gasp.

“Come closer,” Dyota said, straining her left hand up from her leather binds. She sounded lucid.

“What happened to you, sister?” Idonea whispered.

She moved closer and stood by her side, her hand shaking as she reached out.

Dyota’s face twisted into an angry snarl, and her hand broke free from her bonds. She snatched at Idonea’s wrist; her grip was tight, burning against Idonea’s flesh. With a sharp tug, Dyota pulled her down towards her face.

“Save me,” she rasped.

Then reality tore apart.

Idonea shook her head, but the motion only dislodged more pain. Tears burned her eyes. She found herself on hands and knees, the rug blurring beneath her as blood fell from her nose and darkened the weave.

Her stomach lurched. Bile gathered at the back of her throat and she dry-heaved, her whole body clenching with the effort. A ring of red seared around her wrist; the burn was real.

“Thank you, Idonea,” the High Hierophant said, like she’d offered him a courtesy. “You may leave now.”

Rage snapped through her sharply.

Her hands curled into fists. *How dare he rip open her mind?*

The mirrors stood placid once more. The witches who'd assisted him were already gone.

Her nails lengthened without conscious command, biting deep into her palms. Blood welled in crescents, the Current surged in response, unfurling like something hungry.

She grasped the most volatile threads. Her body trembled with the strain.

“Get up, Riven,” commanded the High Hierophant.

She raised her head, glaring towards him. The throb in her skull pulsed harder; her first warning that the spell would exact its price.

Idonea wove the Current towards the mirrors.

Her intent sharpened like a blade. His spell had opened her mind, and she would return the cost.

The High Hierophant’s face blanched as realisation dawned. He took two sharp steps back. “Templars!”

Idonea didn’t stop; blood dripped from her palms. The Current thickened with it.

She whispered, through clenched teeth, “Break.”

The magic bucked, caught, and then, the mirrors exploded. A burst of shattering glass tore outward in a vicious roar. Jagged shards erupted from every surface, each one shimmering with a faint crimson glow.

The shards twisted in the air, spinning, leaving thin red trails behind them like burning comets.

The door crashed open. Templars surged in.

The High Hierophant shrieked as the spinning shards sliced across him. Thin cuts opened along his arms, his shins, a shallow line across his cheek. Blood beaded along the glowing cuts, as if the glass had cauterised and cut simultaneously.

Idonea staggered. The world tilted sharply, her stomach dropping like the floor gave way. The cost hit her. A wave of nausea and vertigo smashed into her. Her vision blurred.

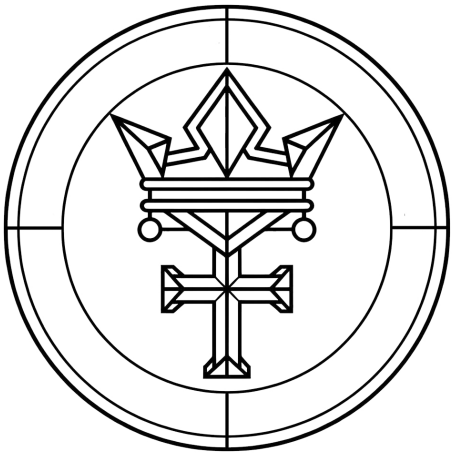
She tasted blood again, warm and metallic on her tongue.

The shards lost their glow and clattered harmlessly to the floor.

Idonea swayed once, twice, then dropped to her knees.

The Hierophant didn't move. He watched her the way a man watches a fire he cannot put out.

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Chapter 24

A second crash slammed the already open door wider.

Idonea tried to tilt her head, but the world pitched again.

Alcaeus was first through, jaw clenched. Lysander was a heartbeat behind him, going straight to her.

“Witchling—” His voice cut short when he saw the blood soaking her palms and nose. He dropped to his knees beside her, one arm instantly bracing her shoulders before she could collapse again. “Hey, hey, look at me. Breathe.” His hand hovered near her face, afraid to touch but desperate to. “What did they do to you?”

She couldn’t form the words. The dizziness was too heavy, her tongue swollen.

Behind them, Alcaeus turned towards the High Hierophant. Glass crunched beneath his boots as he stepped closer.

The High Hierophant clutched his cut arm, robes torn, eyes wide with a fury that didn’t reach his trembling fingers. He opened his mouth.

Alcaeus cut him off. “What,” he said, “did you do to my daughter?”

The High Hierophant stiffened. “Brother Alcaeus, she attacked me—”

“No.” Alcaeus took another step forward. “You provoked her.”

Every Templar stilled. None of them moved towards Alcaeus or Lysander, and none went to seize Idonea.

Lysander shifted, adjusting Idonea so her head rested against his chest, his arm a solid bar around her back. The mechanical arm took her weight. His hand pressed gently to the pulse point under her ear, tracking her breathing, grounding her. “We’re leaving,” he whispered to her. “I’ve got you.”

The High Hierophant’s mouth pressed into a thin line. “She used Riven magic. She—”

Alcaeus’ voice sharpened. “You crossed a line.”

“That girl is dangerous. She carries a connection—”

“Enough.”

Lysander froze for half a breath.

Alcaeus stepped fully into the High Hierophant’s space, closer than decorum allowed. His voice softened. “You will never be alone with her again.”

The High Hierophant’s nostrils flared. “You dare dictate—”

“I dare protect my own.” He turned on his heel.

Lysander rose, lifting Idonea in his arms. She sagged against him, exhausted, but conscious enough to bury her face against his shoulder.

Alcaeus didn’t look back as he spoke over his shoulder. “We’re done here.”

The Templars shifted aside. Not one dared to stop them. The High Hierophant stood frozen, blood on his sleeves.

Lysander carried Idonea through the doorway. He looked back at the High Hierophant. “Touch her again,” he said, “and I will consider you an enemy.”

Fresh air caressed her cheeks.

Lysander shook her in his arms. “Stay awake, Idonea.”

Her eyelids were heavy.

“Get Kitsa,” Alcaeus called.



She woke into a body that had been wrenched apart and stitched wrong.

She groaned, forcing her eyelids open against the burning light. A horrible throb settled behind her eyes. Her stomach twisted, threatening to heave even though there was nothing left inside her.

A shadow moved at the edge of her vision. She startled, gasping sharply. Her fingers curled into the blanket as her whole body tensed.

“Only me, witchling.”

She should’ve known it was him. His scent settled her insides before she consciously recognised him.

He crouched at the side of her bed. His eyes, steady and watchful, studied her with an intensity that made her throat tighten.

“How are you?” he whispered.

She blinked, then focused on him. “Bad.” Her voice rasped as she struggled to sit. The effort made her head spin, vision blurring at the edges.

His left hand flexed against his knee. “Alcaeus is back on the airship,” he said instead of reaching for her.

“They’re still here?” Idonea’s mind was foggy. She knew something had happened on the ship. She knew she’d attacked the High Hierophant. *But why?*

Lysander half-reached for her again, then drew back sharply and stood. “They’ll leave soon.” His jaw tightened. “Sooner, if Alcaeus has his way.”

She licked her lips. A dryness ached in her throat. “How long … how long have I slept?”

His gaze flicked to her, then away. His fingers closed and opened once before he forced them still.

“Too long,” he said. Then, softer. “About fourteen hours.”

Idonea’s hand fumbled for her glasses on the bedside table, then for the cup of water. Her fingers shook as she lifted it, spilling some down her wrist. Cool relief coated her parched throat.

“And Kitsa?”

Lysander sat next to her on the bed, close enough that his heat brushed against her skin. “She helped heal you.”

Idonea frowned. “But…” Her fingers drifted to her temple, rubbing slow circles. The harder she reached for her memories, the more they slipped backward into fog. Shadows without shape. “I don’t remember. It’s … clouded.”

His right hand lifted, hesitating for a breath, before settling against her cheek. “How much did he hurt you?”

She pressed her hand against his, leaning into his warm touch. She closed her eyes.

“Resonants…” She hummed lowly, trying to force the thought into shape. “They did something.”

His fingers twitched, the muscle in his jaw tightening. The furrow between his brows deepened. “With magic?”

Idonea opened her eyes, the ceiling above blurry at first. “Like I’m missing seams. An … emptiness.”

Lysander drew in a sharp breath, ready to speak, but the door creaked open.

Kitsa slipped into the room. The usual flame in her eyes was dimmed, rimmed red from crying. She smelled faintly of ash and lavender, a bitter comfort. She didn't speak right away, only crossed to the bedside table and set down a clay bowl filled with dried herbs. Her gaze found Idonea's face and paused there.

"You're awake," Kitsa murmured.

Idonea tried to smile, but it faltered halfway. "And you to thank for it."

Kitsa's expression darkened, her gaze shifting to Lysander. "Give us a moment?"

His hand slipped away from Idonea's cheek with reluctant slowness. Then he nodded once and stood, his presence leaving the air colder. She hated how much she noticed. The door clicked shut.

Kitsa perched on the end of the bed. "They tampered with your resonance."

The words hit like a blow. Idonea sucked in a sharp breath. "No, I ... Kitsa, I remember what happened. I attacked him after the Resonants left. I remember that. How could they—?"

"I know," Kitsa said gently. "Which means they didn't wipe your memory. They rewove it while it was still whole."

Idonea stiffened, horror coiling tight in her belly. "Are you sure?"

"Resonance mending with cruel intent," Kitsa said, jaw tightening. "You had Current burns on your wrists. Deep ones."

Idonea looked down at her trembling fingers.

She swallowed hard. The taste of bile burned her tongue. *Lysander serves them. Alcaeus is devoted to them.* The thought turned her stomach.

"It was a memory … but not," she whispered, recalling the encounter with Dyota. "They … threaded something through my mind, didn't they?"

Kitsa exhaled through her nose. "After I examined you, I found impressions in your resonance. Seams — places stitched closed." She swallowed.

Idonea's stomach twisted. "So, I can't see them."

"No." Kitsa shook her head. "They made it appear *whole*. A casual resonant check would find nothing wrong."

Idonea stared at her hands. Her pulse hammered in her ears. *What else did they take? What else did they slip inside me?* A cold shudder crawled

along her spine.

She shoved the blankets away, breath hitching as pain lanced through her joints. The ache was deep and nauseating, but she swung her legs over the edge anyway. She wouldn't lie helpless.

Kitsa flinched, hands out. "Idonea—"

"I'm not staying in that bed." Her voice broke at the end, betraying her.

Kitsa steadied her by the elbow, her touch warm and grounding. "We can try to fix it," she said. "But you'll have to reclaim the resonance yourself. No one can do that for you."

A heartbeat of silence stretched between them. Outside the door, faint footsteps paused. Lysander. Part of her wanted him to return, another part wanted to scream.

How can you stand with people who do this? How do you serve them and look me in the eye?

She closed her eyes, breath shaking, as the room swayed around her. "Tell me what I have to do."

Kitsa sighed. "By finding the seams."

Idonea steadied herself on Kitsa's arm. "We will. Later. I need to speak to Alcaeus."

The door opened. Lysander was waiting, rising from a chair. He stopped short when she emerged, his eyes darting over her fragile stance. He didn't move closer, didn't crowd her, but he looked one breath away from catching her if she swayed.

"Alcaeus, is he back?" she asked.

"We can wait in his house," he said.

She glanced back at Kitsa, who leaned against the doorframe. Kitsa gave a nod. Idonea straightened, ignoring the way her body trembled, and followed Lysander out.

The usual Templar sentry at the fountain observed them. Lysander didn't follow her inside. She walked into Alcaeus' office alone.

To her surprise, he was seated in his chair. A glass of amber liquid rested by his hand. His face looked older, more tired.

"I'm relieved you're up," he said.

Her eyes drifted to the floor. "Thank you."

He rubbed at his neck. "What really happened up in that airship?"

"I…"

“Sit,” he said. He stood and poured another glass, pushing it towards her.

A sickening feeling filled her stomach. She clutched her hand around the drink. “He used Resonants to expose memories.” He leaned forward in his chair. “Unlocked memories I never knew I had.”

“Was he after something in particular?” Alcaeus leaned forward, his eyes narrowing.

Idonea drained the glass in one go, barely tasting it. “Lysander said you were up there with him, after.”

Alcaeus shook his head. “Semantics. Promises. But, go on.”

She licked her lips. “Dyota.” Her voice cracked.

He sucked in a breath.

Idonea leaned forward, voice trembling. “Though I can’t believe she fell to the dark corruption. Not her.”

“I want you to look at this.” He fetched a frame out of the desk and held it out to her.

It was Dyota.

“What is this?” she whispered.

“That was the day they took your sister away,” he said.

“And that other photo?” Her knuckles whitened around the wood.

“A year before.” He walked around and leaned against the desk. “She did something no witch should ever try.”

Idonea glanced down at the photo. Dark black lines ran along her arms and neck, a blackness took over her veins. She ran her thumb along Dyota’s twisted face. Dyota had fallen into the deepest shadow of darkness.

She swallowed hard. “What?” She knew what he was about to say, but she needed to hear him say it.

“She attempted to cross through the Nexis,” he said. “I’m not sure what made her do it.” Pain lanced through his eyes.

“You said you took her to be safe.” Her voice sharpened. “Safe.”

He gripped the edge of the desk. “I truly am sorry, Idonea.”

She held the frame close to her heart. “What she needs is her sister. I should’ve gone with her." The words tore out before she could stop them. "I should’ve fought more.”

Alcaeus leaned forward and squeezed her shoulder. “I’m sorry for what the High Hierophant did to you. But it will not happen again.”

Idonea took a deep breath. “I’m not to be shackled?”

He looked away, telling her everything she needed to know.

She rose from the chair, her pulse pounding in her ears. “You told him something.” Her voice trembled. “You told him something about me.”

He shook his head. “All I said is I might’ve found a hint to where the relic is.”

“Liar. You knew what they’d do to me.”

His eyes widened. “Idonea—”

“I found that room.” Her voice rose. “Down in the basement. Where you kept her.”

Alcaeus froze.

Her breath shook, but her anger didn’t. “You tell me pieces of truth, just enough to silence me, but you never tell the whole of it.”

He opened his mouth, but she cut him off with a hard glare.

“How long did you keep her caged like an animal?” Idonea demanded. “How long was she bound to a bed? How many times did she cry out for help and you ignored her?”

Alcaeus flinched. “It was the only way. Hate me if you must—”

“Oh, I do,” she said, voice sharpening. “And I will until you give me answers.” She stepped closer, fire building in her chest. “Tell me the truth. All of it. Did Dyota kill those witches three years ago? The ones that fill the cemetery?”

Her voice rang off the walls. “Was it her, Alcaeus?”

He opened his mouth just as the door swung open.

Lysander stepped inside, eyes locking instantly on Idonea. He took in her shaking hands, her wild breathing, the fury bleeding off her in waves. One step brought him closer, steady, grounding, his presence pushing her rage back from the edge.

Alcaeus’ mouth snapped shut.

Idonea’s voice fell silent. Her eyes narrowed. Without another word, she left.

Lysander stayed silent as he followed her back to the cottage. Idonea tilted towards his warmth.

By the time they reached the cottage, her legs were untrustworthy, but she held herself straight. She crossed the room, took the framed photo of Dyota from her arms, and placed it on the mantel beside the other. Side by side, the contrast punched the air from her lungs.

How had things gone so wrong?

Lysander hovered a step behind her.

When he spoke, his voice was low. “What did he say to you?”

Idonea stared at the two pictures. “Enough,” she said. “And not enough. Never enough.”

Lysander didn’t press, but he waited.

She swallowed, jaw tight. “He didn’t protect her, Lysander.”

His silence was not unkind.

Idonea’s fingers dug into her palms. “And the witches who died three years ago?" He didn’t deny it. “If she did it … she must have been terrified. Or lost. Or—”

Her voice broke, and she hated that it did. “She needed me.”

A muscle tightened in Lysander’s cheek. “You were not her parent.”

“It doesn’t change that she suffered.” Idonea turned to him, anger and grief threading through her voice. “And now he decides the truth matters? Now he wants forgiveness? After letting them rip into my mind?”

Lysander’s eyes darkened. “What they did to you won’t happen again.”

She let her forehead rest against the mantel, steadying her breath. Lysander didn’t reach for her, didn’t touch without invitation. But he was beside her, silent and solid.

“He still serves them,” she said. “He still believes in the Order.”

“You are not theirs.” Lysander’s voice held an edge.

A held breath went out of her. She shifted away from the mantel, his expression softening immediately.

His hand lifted, hovering near her shoulder. “I’ve finished the sensor.”

She breathed out, letting the shift in subject steady her. “The daemon one?”

He nodded and let his fingers rest gently against her shoulder. “Come downstairs. I’ll show you.”

She let him guide her towards the basement steps. Her feet were unsteady, but she didn’t pull away from him.

Downstairs, the metallic scent of Lodamante filled the air. Lysander moved to the worktable, sliding the Lodamante sheets outward to reveal the device he’d assembled.

At its centre was a pale, opalescent crystal.

“With you,” he said, “we can calibrate it.”

Idonea’s throat tightened around rising doubt. “I don’t know if I’m strong enough yet.”

Lysander stepped closer, meeting her gaze. “You are.” His voice held no question, no hesitation. “Trust me.”

He adjusted a lens. “Come.”

Idonea stepped closer, pulse fluttering in her throat. She laid her palm over it.

“Now,” he said, “breathe. Think of what Kitsa has taught you.”

She inhaled, steadying herself. The Current rose around her thoughts, familiar but skittish. Resonance magic required alignment. Still, she tried.

She reached inward. The Current shivered, resisting at first, then touched the edges of the crystal’s aura. Beneath her fingertips, the daemon-tainted energy shuddered like a plucked wire, discordant and cold. It made the Current recoil, but she forced herself to stay with it.

Remember the shape, Kitsa had told her. *Not the power, its imprint.*

Idonea sought that echo now: the peculiar twist daemon energy left in the Current, like gravity bending the wrong way. Once she found the threads, she tuned her resonance to the crystal.

The effort punched straight through her chest.

Her knees went soft. A wave of cold drained her strength, leaving her swaying as the crystal vibrated under her hand.

She tied the resonance knot firmly, then severed the connection. The world tilted.

Lysander’s arms were around her before she could fall, one hand anchoring at her back, the other steadying her shoulder. His grip was firm.

“It’s done,” she said.

Their eyes met, breath still entangled. He didn’t let go.

His gaze flicked to her mouth, lingering, breath warm against her cheek. “We … should set it up,” he said, though he didn’t move an inch.

“We should.” Her breath hitched. Her eyes dipped briefly to his lips before rising back to his gaze.

“Idonea…” Her name scraped out of him.

He leaned in, giving her time to refuse.

She didn’t.

Her fingers curled into his coat, pulling him closer without meaning to.

The moment their lips met, everything unravelled.

Their noses bumped, and her glasses pressed crookedly into the bridge of her nose, except that she didn't push them straight, and his breath had caught on hers in the same instant hers did, so that neither of them was

breathing properly anymore, only pressing closer like stopping would hurt worse.

But when he kissed her, it was as if he'd been waiting forever. His mouth claimed hers with a fierce, aching need, lips urgent, trembling. She answered in kind, clutching fistfuls of fabric at his waist, dragging him closer like she'd fall apart otherwise.

He made a low sound and deepened the kiss, his hand sliding up to cradle the back of her neck, thumb brushing her pulse. Their teeth grazed, breaths clashing, the world narrowing to heat and pressure and the dizzying shock of *finally*.

She smelled cold rain and ash. The memory of hands returned, tracing her skin without fear, without consequence. Jovana's laugh rose unbidden, soft and incredulous, as if she were amused by Idonea's foolishness.

Still alive, the memory said. *Even now*.

They broke apart with a stagger of breath. A shaky laugh caught in her throat.

His forehead rested against hers, both still panting. Her lips tingled, her body thrumming with heat.

He pulled back. His eyes went to her lips, lingered, slid down to her throat. Then he looked at the floor instead.

Lysander stepped back so abruptly her fingers slipped from his coat.

"I—" His voice cracked. He cleared it, but it didn't help. "I shouldn't have done that."

Her heart clenched. "Lysander—"

"No." He scrubbed a hand over his face. "Idonea, I shouldn't—"

"You kissed me," she said.

"Idonea." His voice was rough. "I told you what the Eitr does. What I am made into. I should not be able to want like this."

Her breath simply died in her throat. "Then your Order lied to you."

"Or I am broken in a way they didn't predict." He scrubbed a hand across his face. "I don't know which is worse, witchling. I don't know what I am if I can do this. I need to think."

He backed away, putting the table between them. His hands braced on its edge.

"Lysander—"

"I need air." He closed his eyes. "Just, stay here. Please. Don't follow."

His voice frayed on the last word.

She took a step towards him. He stepped back.

“Fine,” she murmured.

“I’ll set this up.” He took the sensor and retreated from the basement.

Silence settled in the basement, thick and cold. She pressed her fingers harder to her lips, as if the heat might burn away.

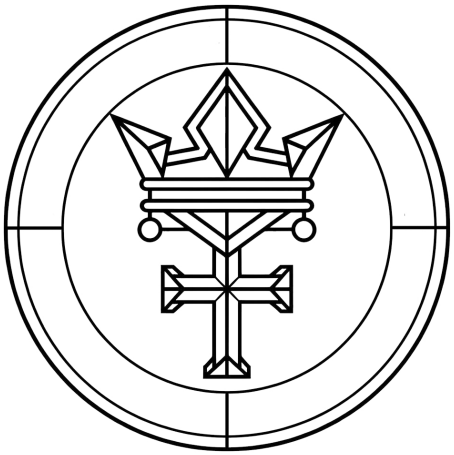
Idonea swallowed and forced the sensation down. This was not longing. This was muscle memory. The body was treacherous; it remembered what the mind refused to dwell on.

Grief was not a thing she indulged in. It was a thing she used.

Her eyes hardened.

So much had delayed her. Nellith needed her. Everything else was noise.

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Chapter 25

Idonea made her way up into the cottage and stared at the front door. Without Lysander by her side, the Templars might not permit her exit. It crossed her mind that he might've locked the door behind him when he left, thinking it safer for her.

Her mouth remembered him. She pressed her lips together and put the remembering aside. There was no time for it. There was never going to be time for it.

She couldn't doubt herself now. It was too important.

Her hand trembled as she reached for the latch. The door opened without resistance, and cold air swept into the room. She peered out, but the Templar who normally stood guard near the fountain was absent.

Her pulse leapt, relief and dread tangling in her chest. An empty watch could mean fortune, or trap.

She stepped out, drawing her cloak tighter and pressed onward, each step testing the silence. Every corner of her mind screamed that the Templars must be near, hidden in shadows, watching. Yet no footsteps followed, no steel rang out. Idonea hurried towards where she spied that old oak tree near the gazebo. Her boots crunched against the frost-hardened earth, breath curling white in the still air. The world was hushed, save for the distant creak of ice shifting on the water.

The sky stretched vast above her, dusky purple, streaked with pale blue mist that hovered over the black water. No guards, no Templars. No one asking where she was going. Only the wild expanse of night. Her fingers rose unconsciously, tracing along her collarbone.

She stood before the oak, taking in its dark bark, and still the strange sense of wrongness wrapped itself around the space. Her fingers twitched. She swallowed hard and pressed her hand up against the tree.

Idonea's eyes widened. The tree had an absence of Current.

It was a void, an unnatural silence where it should’ve hummed beneath her palm.

Her breath hitched. A living tree with no Current was like a body with no pulse; it shouldn’t have been possible.

She darted a glance over her shoulder, but there was no one else. No noise but the river nearby, and her own heartbeat in her ears.

Crouching, she brushed snow away from the trunk, pushing aside brittle leaves and frost hoping to reveal roots, sigils, anything that explained why it continued to stand when it should've withered years ago.

Her fingers dug through the icy crust, numbness prickling up her knuckles. Warm. The ground was warm, in winter, under snow.

Idonea jerked back in shock. The snow around the base had melted in a perfect ring, hidden beneath the fresh layer that had fallen earlier. She scraped more away with quick, sharp motions.

The soil underneath pulsed faintly, but not Current. It was slower, thicker; a heartbeat of something old and wrong.

Her breath clouded in front of her as she leaned in, her hand hovering a hair’s breadth above the dirt. That shouldn't be possible. The warmth grew, spreading outward, something deep beneath the roots stirring at her touch.

Idonea’s pulse quickened, fear leaking at the base of her spine. She needed to know.

She rolled her sleeves back, exposing the skin of her forearms to the cold. Her fingers drifted towards the pouch at her belt. The ritual pressed against her thoughts.

Idonea drew the dagger across the back of her hand. The sting grounded her as bright red welled and dripped onto the warm earth.

The ground hissed where the blood touched, steam rising in a thin curl. The warmth surged up through her fingers, racing along her arm. Idonea startled and nearly pulled back but forced herself to stay still.

She scattered bone dust in a circle around the base of the trunk, her blood marking the centre. Her fingers barely trembled.

The air burned cold and bitter in her throat. Her chest tightened, ribs straining. She pushed harder, teeth clenched, sweat beading along her brow.

The world dropped out from beneath her. Her stomach lurched.

She hung suspended in nothingness, a body without weight, no ground, no sky, no sound.

Mist bled into the void, orange, and heavy like the light of a perpetual sunset. It crept into her nose and mouth, tasting like rust. Her pulse thundered, uneven breaths shattering the silence. Her muscles jerked uncontrollably, spasms tearing through her limbs.

She was in the threshold, the void between the mortal world and the one beyond the Nexis. The tree had been a hidden gateway. A tear to the veil.

Pain lashed her chest, her lungs, her throat. Her body arched with the strain, and then her back caught fire.

The marks along her spine ignited in sequence, the lowest first, then the next, climbing. Each one a separate line of heat tracing up her vertebrae. By the time the fourth lit, she could feel the shape of each mark from the inside, as if her body had grown new organs along the bone and they were waking, one after another, into something they remembered being.

The fifth didn't light. Relief hit so suddenly it almost hurt.

Her vision blurred with black spots. The roar of her heartbeat filled her skull. Then hands closed around her wrists, warm and steady.

But no one was there.

The touch calmed her all the same, anchored her. She let go of fear, let herself surrender to the state she found herself in.

Her insides hollowed, a force jerked her backward.

Air screamed past her, her body tumbling, pins and needles burning across her fingertips and toes. Her eyes flew open with a gasp.

The mortal world rushed back. She fell forward on her hands, panting. Blood splattered the surrounding ground.

Tiny cuts crisscrossed her arms. She touched her brow, and her fingers came away wet with blood. The throb in her skull surged, pulling her eyelids heavy.

Her back ached. She reached behind herself, slowly, and pressed her palm against her back through her coat. The lowest four marks were warm. Not burning now. Just warm, the way muscle is warm after work.

She didn't know what to do with that knowledge. She filed it where she filed things she didn't yet have words for, and stood.

The earth trembled once, a subtle ripple. Snow slid from the branches above, dusting over her.

Footsteps, far off, crunching in the snow. Idonea’s head snapped up, heart lurching.

"Idonea?"

She stumbled back from the oak. The cuts were everywhere now. He'd see them.

"What happened?"

"I can explain. Probably."

"It looks like you bled out under a tree."

"That's what it looks like. But I'm fine."

"You're not fine."

"Lysander, I swear to all the stars, if you say I'm not fine one more time I'm going to scream."

The clash of voices and the sharp clatter of hooves cut her short.

Her throat closed. “He’s arrived.”

Time was up; the Grand Templar had arrived, and she still hadn’t found the relic.

Lysander’s jaw clenched. “You need to be in that cottage.”

But by the time they returned from the river, it was already too late. The space between them and the cottage was thick with Templars in gleaming armour, their breath misting. At their head, astride a pale gelding, sat the Grand Templar himself.

Alcaeus stood at the horse’s side, speaking up to his superior.

The Templars bore the marks of weariness. Shields dented, blades stained, one man's arm bound tightly in linen. Yet if they had truly fought a daemon, the toll would be heavier, or they wouldn’t be here at all.

The Grand Templar turned from Alcaeus, surveying the gathering with a sharp gaze. The Magistrate and Elzhbeta stood at the fringes silently.

Elzhbeta’s gaze found Idonea, as if she’d been searching for her. Her eyes swept over Idonea’s blood-stained sleeves. Elzhbeta dipped her head in a formal bow.

The cold bit deeper. Horses stamped restlessly.

“The Qoruul raiders,” the Grand Templar declared, his voice clipped, precise, carrying easily through the cold. “We drove them back. But they will return.”

They were nomads of the high steppe, living far beyond the eastern reaches. They followed the old ways, refusing any attempts at encroachment from the Republic. Every winter, the snow swallowed their grazing lands first. Herds starved, camps dwindled, and winter was when they became desperate, and desperation made them bold.

The Grand Templar continued, “They burned two farmsteads on the eastern ridge. No survivors.”

Lysander stiffened beside her, every line of him tense.

Idonea sensed Elzhbeta’s eyes still on her. The woman’s expression remained smooth, but her fingers twitched at the sleeves of her coat. When Idonea met her gaze fully, Elzhbeta’s lips curved into what many would think was a smile.

Alcaeus’ eyes found them in the crowd. He crossed swiftly, his expression composed but heavy. Idonea folded her arms close, trying to hide the cuts and blood from his searching gaze.

“The Grand Templar wants you to lead a contingent south to see the raiders routed,” Alcaeus said to Lysander.

Lysander’s left hand curled at his side. “Qoruul are no daemons.”

“Yet, that is his request.”

The Grand Templar’s attention shifted, his piercing gaze landing on them, and Idonea’s breath caught. She wanted to vanish into the snow.

He dismounted, boots striking the ground with a heavy thud. The crowd of Templars parted like water before him. Idonea edged behind Alcaeus and Lysander, though she knew the effort was futile. Current clung to her, loud and wild, and the blood was impossible to fully conceal.

“Severant Lysander,” the Grand Templar said. Up close, his voice carried an edge of brittle exhaustion beneath the authority.

Lysander inclined his head. “Brother Marcin.”

“I’d have you head out now,” Marcin replied.

“Of course,” Lysander said. Not even a heartbeat’s hesitation. Duty swallowed the softness in his voice, duty burned away the kiss they’d shared a night ago.

Marcin nodded. “Those joining you wait at the stables.”

Idonea’s heart twisted painfully. She searched Lysander’s face for something, for even a flicker of what had been between them in the basement. But he offered her nothing.

He turned and strode towards the stables, steps sharp and swift, as if distance were the only thing keeping him from falling apart. And with every step he took away from her, something inside her coiled tight.

She didn't know when she'd see him again. The Qoruul could kill him. The Order could send him further. The memory of his mouth hit unexpectedly. She hated the timing of it.

Marcin turned to her, his gaze narrowing. “This is your daughter, Brother Alcaeus?” She shivered at his attention.

“Yes,” Alcaeus answered. “And she was just returning to her cottage.”

The Grand Templar’s eyes raked over her, from her face to her trembling hands. Her skin crawled under the weight of his gaze. Idonea clenched her fists tighter, hiding the cuts as best she could. She kept her head bowed, careful to hide the worst of her wounds, and to not show open defiance. Not while she was weakened from her Nexis encounter.

“Alcaeus,” the Grand Templar said, “ensure that she remains in that cottage. She shall not wander again.”

“Yes, Brother Marcin,” Alcaeus replied, his tone even, but his eyes flicked to Idonea with subtle worry.

Marcin’s gaze lingered on Idonea a moment longer, sharp and calculating, then he turned and summoned two Templars. “These shall be your guards.”

Idonea’s stomach knotted. Without Lysander, she'd no true allies. She couldn’t seek help from Kitsa. She wouldn’t bring a Grand Templar’s ire towards her.

The Templars surrounding her shifted into formation. Each man and woman carried the tension of battle still clinging to their muscles. Their hands were never far from their maces.

Alcaeus fell in step beside her as the group started towards the cottage. “No harm will come to you,” he murmured.

Idonea’s lips pressed into a thin line, but she resisted biting back. The two Templars assigned to guard her positioned themselves on either side of the door. Another Templar already patrolled along the perimeter, boots leaving a careful rhythm against the snow.

Alcaeus gestured towards the front door. “This will not be forever.”

Idonea nodded, swallowing hard.

Marcin spoke once more. “Make no attempt to leave without permission.”

Idonea’s chest tensed. The gaze of every Templar was on her, so she forced herself to step inside, her hands still trembling.

Alcaeus followed her in, his eyes scanning her face with quiet concern. The door closed behind them. Idonea leaned against the door, letting the brief warmth of the interior seep into her bones.

“Rest,” he said.

“And the relic?”

He sighed, scrubbing a hand over his face. “The Grand Templar does not know that yet. If they can dispatch this daemon, then that is for the best.”

“Yet, he sent away the Daemonbreaker.”

Alcaeus said no more and left. Idonea flinched at the sound of the metal latch clanging against the door.

Her body ached, her mind spun, yet she knew she couldn't linger in despair. She’d lost her chance to hunt the relic and find Nellith without high interference.

It was as if this place was a flame drawing all life to it.

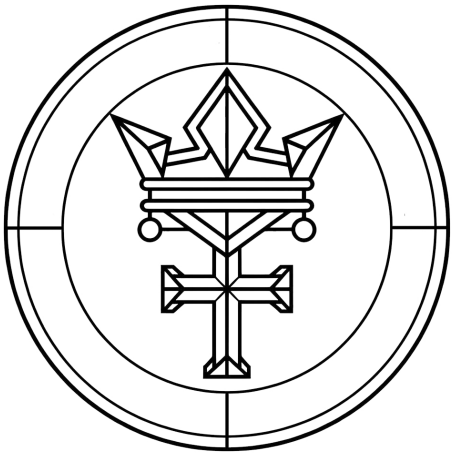
The blood from the cuts had dried in patches. She flexed her fingers, willing the pain to dull. She’d have to bathe.

Her eyes went to the trapdoor, but she knew Alcaeus wouldn’t risk her going up into his house, not with the Grand Templar likely in residence there too.

The Lodamante gleamed faintly above her. Idonea stared at it. There had to be a way.

She turned to her satchel. The dagger was still in there.

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Chapter 26

Sleep wouldn't come. Every time she closed her eyes, she was back there. The moment before Lysander pulled away. The heat, the sudden absence, the echo of his hands leaving her, as if burned.

Her chest tightened. This was how it happened, she thought, not the kiss but the stopping. She rolled onto her side and stared at the dark.

Jovana never hesitated, she thought. *Not even when she was dying.*

Unrest gnawed at her. Pushing thoughts of Lysander and Jovana aside, her mind kept looping back to the relic's page spread open across the table, the Lodamante, the veil tear. A pathway from the Nexis.

The Templars remained outside, yet something was off. A clamour that didn't fit with such an early hour of day. A cold twinge ran along her spine.

She went to the window, peering out. A crowd had gathered at the far edge, their voices muted, but tense. Snow had been trampled in a chaotic pattern. Idonea's stomach knotted as her thoughts raced.

This couldn't be happening.

Alcaeus arrived moments later, the cottage door clanging open from his haste.

"Idonea," he said, "another witch…" His voice faltered. "Dead. Like the others."

Her heart lurched. "Even with all these extra Templars?" It didn't make sense.

The Grand Templar shouldn't have sent Lysander away; the only one within their ranks designed to handle a daemon. Sending him away had been reckless, or strategic.

She took a deep breath.

"I want you to take a look."

Her eyes snapped to his. "What would the Grand Templar think?"

“He took a party into the forest at dawn,” he said. “Aims to track it down.”

“Who?” she asked, hoping it wasn’t Kitsa.

“Cleo,” he replied.

Idonea stiffened. Cleo had been scheduled to leave for her new posting today, one she'd spoken of with trembling excitement.

A sour dread pooled in Idonea’s gut. “She shouldn’t have been outside at night,” she said.

Alcaeus looked away.

She gestured towards the door. “Show me.”

The two Templars flanking the entrance exchanged a brief, questioning look with Alcaeus, but didn't bar the way. They stepped aside just enough to let her pass, though their eyes tracked every movement. She was certain the moment she left their sight, they would report her to the Grand Templar the instant he returned.

Outside, the settlement lay stripped of its usual murmuring life. Templars had driven all the witches indoors. The air was hollow without their presence. Only one Templar remained behind the chapel, standing rigid over the newest body.

Cleo’s body was crumpled, torn up, and shredded like the others. Idonea searched the snow nearby, but found no sigil. Her brows furrowed. Idonea widened her search, scanning the nearby drifts, the tree line, the chapel’s shadowed wall, but there was nothing.

She crouched, ignoring the way the Templar behind her shifted, hand gripping his hilt, but unwilling to interfere.

No drag marks. No displaced snow. Cleo had died exactly where she fell.

The wounds were like the others but messier, hurried. The strokes hadn't been drawn the way Lysander had drawn them in the air over Edik. They had been rushed. Whoever had done this hadn't had time to be careful.

Idonea's eyes moved, against the heavy weight of not wanting to, to Cleo's face. Her mouth had fallen open. The cold had set it that way, and the inside was very dark.

Idonea reached. Her fingers were shaking before she'd decided to use them. She touched the corner of Cleo's lower lip and eased it down a fraction, no more than she'd have to admit to looking.

The lower right canine was gone. The socket was fresh; the blood in it had clotted on the surface but not gone properly dark, the way it would've if the tooth had come out hours before death. It had been pulled while Cleo was alive, or in the moments after.

Idonea took her fingers away. She didn't stand yet. She closed her own mouth, deliberately, and held it closed.

Three of them, three open mouths, three teeth. The first she'd not known how to see. The second she'd refused. The third was making her see it whether or not she wished to.

She tried to recall if there was anything off about Cleo, but came up with nothing. Idonea sighed and looked up at the chapel. They hadn’t let her enter it.

With the other Templar hovering so close, she dared not tap into the Current. But she now wanted to go inside that building.

Idonea stood and dusted snow from her clothes. “There’s nothing more here.”

Alcaeus remained silent at her side while they headed back towards the cottage.

She walked stiffly. The cold hadn't gone into her bones the way it should have. Her body was doing something else with itself, holding heat in places it ordinarily would not.

She didn't look at her father, or not look at the lamps. She walked.

The first two had sigils. This one did not. The first two had been done with care. This one had been done with speed. The first two had been arranged, placed, displayed. This one had been killed where she stood, and left where she fell, because she'd been about to leave and there hadn't been time.

The killer hadn't had time. The killer was someone for whom time was a finite resource. Someone whose schedule could be interrupted. Someone who'd been *here* in the village and had needed to kill *here*, in a hurry, before something else happened.

Not a daemon, for a daemon does not have a schedule.

As they neared the empty fountain, something tugged at Idonea, and she followed that instinct.

Idonea halted. “Give me a moment.”

It didn’t take long for Idonea to locate the device. But it wasn’t the same as when Lysander had shown her, when they had completed it.

The middle copper tube was missing, wrenched free with deliberate force. The remaining pieces had been left in disarray, wires bent. Someone had sabotaged the device.

Alcaeus stepped forward. “What is that?”

Idonea lifted the damaged device from the fountain.

“It was supposed to warn us,” she said. “But someone made sure it never could.”

Someone here. Colour drained from her face.

“Lysander made this?” he asked.

Idonea handed the device over to him. “Yes. I infused the daemon’s signature into it. It was meant to keep them safe.”

Alcaeus turned it over in his hands. “You’re sure?”

Idonea took a deep breath. It wouldn’t do her any good to blow up yet again in his face. “Someone did this. There is someone here that wants us to fail, working with this daemon.”

He frowned. “No one is daemon-marked.”

“One doesn’t need to sell their soul to work with a daemon,” she said, hands curling at her sides. “All it takes is a motive. A fear. A secret that corruption can feed on.”

Her mind, against her will, laid things side by side.

Three bodies, each missing a tooth. The wounds done with a blade by someone who'd taken their time. Except this last one, which had been rushed because Cleo had been leaving. Someone in the village. Someone who'd been able to enter a Lodamante-warded cottage. Someone who had a key, or who knew about the hatches. Someone who hadn't been at Arina's body when she'd been screamed for, who'd arrived late from her own house, composed in the way of a person practising a face. Someone who'd been at her window the night before, watching the snow, watching Idonea cross with Lysander beneath. Someone whose hands she'd never seen.

Idonea drew a breath. She didn't say the name to herself. She didn't need to. The name arrived before she could stop it. Elzhbeta.

Lidiya had been at Arina's body too, glassy and quiet, with dirt under her nails. Lidiya knew the chapel basement, and Lidiya let Edik into her larder for a long time and they hadn't been making bread.

Two names, one older than the other; one too close to the scene, one too careful about not being. Someone was playing both sides.

Horse hooves echoed in the distance, and Alcaeus glanced towards the forest. “Come. Back to the cottage.”

Idonea followed, though dread rose in her stomach. He ushered her inside, but didn't step through after her. Instead, he shut the door firmly and remained outside.

She exhaled and froze. A shadow stood in the threshold of the bedroom.

Her hand drifted instantly to her dagger.

Elzhbeta stepped forward, though she didn't sit or lean. She only watched.

“Elzhbeta?” Idonea kept her voice even. She hadn't yet allowed her mind to finish what it had been doing at the fountain. Now, in the half-dark of the cottage, with the older woman standing perfectly still in the doorway of her own bedroom, the last refusal fell.

She'd hardly seen the Magistrate's wife since the younger witches departed. Elzhbeta had turned silent, keeping mostly to the chapel and her husband's side.

Now her gaze was sharp. Elzhbeta’s lips curved into a thin smile. “I think it is time you understood something.”

Idonea didn’t remove her hand from her weapon’s hilt.

“Your father cannot shield you from the Grand Templar,” Elzhbeta said. “Or from the High Hierophant.”

Idonea's gaze dropped to Elzhbeta's gloved hands. Her gut twisted as a memory surfaced sharp and unbidden. Lance's tongue flickering at open mouths. Edik's right fist closed around chapel dirt. *No. It can't be.* But her body already knew. Her pulse stuttered, then steadied into cold certainty.

"The teeth," she whispered.

Elzhbeta's smile didn't move, but the muscles around her eyes shifted. "Beg your pardon."

"Arina. Edik. Cleo. You took a tooth from each of them. You pulled them while they were still warm. The wounds on the bodies were dressing, the sigils were dressing, the daemon was dressing. The work was the teeth."

A long silence. Elzhbeta exhaled. It was a laugh, the breath of a person caught by surprise.

"Clever," she said. "How long have you known?"

"I was on the path back from her body when I let myself."

"And your father?"

"He doesn't know."

"No. He wouldn't." Elzhbeta inclined her head. "He is very good at the part of himself that does not want to know things."

She closed the distance between them, removing her gloves with slow, deliberate motions. When her bare palms turned upward, Idonea’s breath caught.

Embedded in the centre of each palm was a disk of blue-black metal, fused with the skin.

“Surprised?” Elzhbeta said.

“Lodamante.”

“They sealed my palms when I was fourteen.” Elzhbeta turned her hands once, as one might display a piece of work. "I wore shackles and a collar for years. They said it was mercy. I have come to a different understanding of the word."

"You can't work the Current."

"Not through these." She lowered her hands. "The Current can be reached. Just not the way you reach it."

Idonea's stomach turned.

"The teeth."

"The teeth." Elzhbeta's gaze didn't waver. "Each one a small store of a witch's living essence. Set into a working that has been growing in the chapel basement for two winters."

"What working."

Elzhbeta smiled. "A harbour."

Idonea didn't understand, so she waited.

"Somewhere," Elzhbeta said, "another witch has been preparing a door. I don't know who. I don't know where. Vinea has not told me — he is careful with his tools, and he has more than one. But a door is only half a working. A door opens onto *somewhere*. A daemon who crosses must have a place to land in this world, or he will come apart in the crossing. The mortal plane does not tolerate the shape of him for long. He needs an anchor. A body. A *harbour*."

The words landed slowly.

"You," Idonea said. "You are the harbour."

"Yes."

"He will wear you."

"He will *be* me. We will be one thing. The witch the Order broke at fourteen will be the witch who unmakes the Order at fifty. That is the bargain I have made, and I have kept my half of it, and the working in the basement is nearly complete." Her eyes glittered. "Three teeth set. One socket waiting."

"For me."

"For you. The fourth. The Riven who came to this village with her mother's signature still on her skin. I didn't know who you were when you arrived, Idonea. I knew only that Vinea was *interested*. He has been very interested in you. More than he has been in me, lately. I have been wondering why."

A flicker, then, behind the composure. The first crack Idonea had seen in her.

"He has not told me everything."

"No."

"He has told you?"

"No. But I have begun to suspect that he has more than one witch on this errand, and that I am not the one he loves best."

Idonea's grip on her dagger tightened. There would, possibly, not be a later in which to think about it — but there might.

“The Magistrate found me starving,” Elzhbeta said. "He thought he was saving a witch. He has never known what he saved."

"He doesn't know about the teeth."

"He does not. Nor about Vinea. Nor about the door beneath the chapel. He sleeps beside me each night and he does not know I have a working. That is the gift of his particular kindness. It does not look for what does not want to be looked at."

A pause. Elzhbeta took a single step forward. Idonea didn't retreat, she didn't yet know how to.

"I have been doing this work for years, Idonea. I have built a working that no one in any generation since has had the patience to build. But now I have the teeth, placed perfectly, set into a door that has been waiting for its last."

"And then?"

"And then it opens."

Idonea's breath caught. "You can't —"

"I can. I have." A flicker of contempt. "Killing them was easy, Idonea." Elzhbeta's voice didn't waver. "Three for the door. The fourth is yours."

"Why—" Her voice cracked. She swallowed. "Why are you telling me this?"

Elzhbeta tilted her head, and the terrible smile that curved her lips was gentle. "Because I want one person to know. Before." She paused, and pride, or grief, flickered through her eyes. "It seems unfair, after so much work, to die without somebody having seen it."

Idonea's blood turned to ice in her veins. "You're going to die?"

Elzhbeta's mouth twitched. "Eventually. As we all do. I would prefer it to be after the door is finished."

“And I,” Elzhbeta said, “am no one’s pawn.” Her voice changed. “Right now, Idonea … you're a disruption.”

"That relic is for the daemon. It has always been for the daemon. The Order didn't understand what they were guarding. I did. I have spent years building the working that will deliver it correctly. I will not be the witch who arrives at the threshold with one tooth missing."

Before Idonea drew breath, Elzhbeta moved.

Her hand snapped forward with inhuman precision. A thin, gleaming blade flashed before Idonea even registered the attack.

White-hot agony tore through her ribs. The impact drove her back a step, then another. She clutched her side as warmth spread beneath her fingers. Blood ran slick over her palms, the taste of iron rising in her throat.

Elzhbeta didn't flinch. Her eyes were flat, unwavering.

“You see,” she said, “sometimes the only way to keep balance … is to remove the threat entirely.”

Idonea’s thoughts scattered.

Not here. Not inside the threshold where the Current lay silent. Not while Templars stood outside, close enough to save her, yet utterly unaware.

Pain pulsed with each heartbeat, stabbing and rhythmic. Elzhbeta stepped forward again, blade angled with ruthless intent.

Idonea forced her shaking fingers to tighten around her own dagger. She had no training, no strength to match this, but she'd no other choice.

As Elzhbeta struck again, Idonea lunged sideways. Steel met steel with a ringing crack. The force of it sent a shock through her arm. She stumbled, rolled, the floorboards scraping her palms as she twisted away from another downward slash.

She slashed upward on instinct, her blade skimming across Elzhbeta’s forearm.

Elzhbeta hissed, and withdrew a fraction, eyes narrowing.

Blood trickled down Idonea’s ribs. Each breath was a ragged, burning drag. She was weakening, limbs beginning to tremble. But she refused to collapse.

Another strike came, fast and precise. Idonea ducked under it, rolling towards the table leg. Her shoulder slammed into it, rattling the dishes. The noise was loud. It should've drawn attention.

Where are the Templars?

Elzhbeta stalked after her, steps slow, confident.

“Give in,” she murmured. “This only ends one way.”

Idonea pushed herself upright, her dagger raised despite the tremor in her hand. Her breaths came in shuddering bursts. The room swam, yet the world sharpened around Elzhbeta’s silhouette. Idonea steadied herself.

“I am no threat,” she said again.

Elzhbeta’s lip curled. “That relic is not for your taking.”

She lifted her blade for the killing blow.

Idonea’s mind raced. The dagger in her hand was impossibly light. It wasn’t meant to be a weapon. But it was all she had.

Elzhbeta’s blade swept towards Idonea’s ribs. Idonea twisted hard, the steel slicing through her sleeve instead of flesh. The momentum sent her stumbling sideways, boots scuffing across the floorboards.

Elzhbeta lunged again. Idonea sidestepped and drove her dagger into Elzhbeta’s arm.

Elzhbeta groaned venomously, and Idonea yanked the blade free.

The momentary opening was all she needed. She lowered her shoulder and slammed into Elzhbeta’s torso.

They crashed to the ground.

A shock of pain tore through Idonea’s wounded side, and her vision flickered at the edges. Their limbs tangled, blades scraping floorboards. For a heartbeat Elzhbeta was underneath her.

But Elzhbeta shoved Idonea aside.

Idonea rolled, barely catching herself on shaking palms. Elzhbeta rose cleanly, blade lifted, expression carved from ice.

“That relic is dangerous,” Idonea said, hoping to appeal to the woman’s better nature. “Tell me where it is.”

“It is right where it needs to be.”

Idonea stumbled into the nearby table, her hands resting over a chair. “Do not be a fool.”

Elzhbeta shook her head and raised her blade again.

Idonea swung the chair, catching Elzhbeta in the chest. Idonea darted past, lunging for the door, ribs screaming, blood soaking into her clothes.

But Elzhbeta was already turning, impossibly fast.

Pain flared in Idonea’s ribs as Elzhbeta’s dagger bit again. She cried out, staggering, knees nearly buckling. Heat and wetness spilled between her fingers.

She couldn’t win this. She couldn’t *kill* Elzhbeta. She needed her alive, needed her knowledge. Idonea needed to survive, to think, to buy time, to have someone hear.

Elzhbeta stepped smoothly between her and the door.

Idonea lunged forward, shoulder first, using all her remaining strength to shove her against the door. The impact rattled her bones.

The bang of the bar being shifted rang towards her. She let out a huff of a laugh, blood dribbling from her lips.

Elzhbeta’s eyes widened, going from Idonea to the door. She dashed past, but Idonea was too slow to grab at her.

Idonea’s strength faded, falling to her knees. She watched as Elzhbeta deftly opened the hatch and disappeared down through it.

The door swung open, a scream pierced her ears.

Kitsa ran into the cottage. She slammed down to her knees and ran her hands all over Idonea’s body, cataloguing the many wounds.

“Don’t try to talk,” Kitsa said, her hands shaking.

Distant shouts and footfalls over snow reached her faintly.

“I’m fine,” she choked out, the copper tang of blood sitting on her tongue. She leaned her head back down against the ground.

“Idonea?” The voice belonged to Alcaeus. Idonea closed her eyes.

Kitsa cupped Idonea’s face. “Stay awake.” Tears blurred her dark lashes.

“We need to heal her,” Alcaeus said. “Now.”

Idonea whimpered at the very thought of being moved. Pain radiated from her ribs, her side, her lungs. Darkness edged her vision, curling inward like smoke.

Strong arms lifted her from the ground. For a fleeting instant, confusion, and longing tangled through her fading thoughts.

I want it to be Lysander…

Cold air stung her skin. Snow bit against her legs.

They hadn’t carried her far outside, just enough space. Darkness pressed in, swallowing the edges of the world.

Templar boots crowded in her space.

“Find the one who did this,” Alcaeus ordered.

“She could have done this herself,” one Templar said.

“No,” Kitsa’s voice cut through, “these are not self-inflicted.”

A quiet stirring sparked deep in Idonea’s core, like Current, but thinner, patchy, wavering. It radiated through her limbs, twitching all the way to her fingertips and toes. She'd known this exact tremor only once before.

When she crossed the veil. Memory slammed into her with brutal force.

Snow. The oak. Black veins threading through the air. The tear like an open wound. Hands grabbing at her. A voice, low and wrong, whispering her name.

She gasped and shot upright, head spinning, the world momentarily doubling and then snapping back into place.

“I’m not dead?” she asked.

Kitsa let out a breathless laugh of relief. “No. Not even close.”

Idonea blinked down at herself. Her ribs were tender, but the skin was smooth, no gashes, no bleeding.

“How do you feel?” Alcaeus asked.

She remembered the knife. The warmth pouring through her fingers. The certainty that she was dying. Now there was nothing but tenderness beneath her hand. Her stomach twisted.

Idonea swallowed, her throat full of grit. “Fine.”

“Who did this to you?” he asked.

Her mind flashed to Elzhbeta, to the bite of the blade sliding between her ribs. And to the hatch, the hidden passage.

Elzhbeta was working with the daemon. She not only knew about the relic, but where the relic was. If Idonea named her, the Templars would drag Elzhbeta away before Idonea forced answers out of her. Before she could find the relic. Before she'd any chance of stopping the daemon.

Idonea needed Elzhbeta alive.

“I didn’t see." The lie sat badly in her throat.

Alcaeus frowned and glanced towards the cottage. “It looked like a fight in there.”

Idonea clenched her jaw. “I said I didn’t see.”

Alcaeus sighed. “Maybe you shouldn’t be alone after all.”

Kitsa looped her arm through Idonea’s. “She can stay with me.”

A nearby Templar cleared his throat. “Grand Templar orders.”

Alcaeus stood. “Very well. Idonea stays in the cottage. Kitsa, see she gets rest.”

Kitsa smiled. “Of course.”

The Templar’s eyes narrowed, but he let Kitsa and Idonea walk back into the cottage.

Idonea squeezed Kitsa’s hands. “Thank you.”

Her eyes went to the blood coating the floor. A reminder of how close she’d come.

Kitsa nudged Idonea towards the bathroom. “You should bathe. I will clean this.”

“Kitsa, you don't—”

“I do,” she said firmly. “Go.”

Idonea stepped towards the room, hand pressed over her half-healed ribs. She was alive. The simple truth was a miracle.

Elzhbeta had escaped, and the relic was closer than ever.

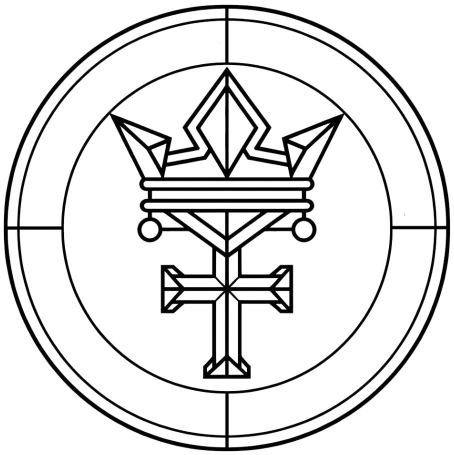
Steam billowed away from Idonea’s skin as she stepped out of the bath, wrapped in a thin cotton robe. Fresh bruises mottled her ribs in ugly shades of violet and green.

She dried her hair with trembling hands and pushed open the bathroom door.

“Kitsa?” she called.

Silence.

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Chapter 27

Kitsa stepped through the door carrying her usual smell of ash and lavender. Idonea's shoulders loosened, finally releasing their tight grip.

Kitsa was alive. Good.

"Ready for lessons?" Kitsa asked, eyes bright with purpose.

Idonea stretched her fingers. "I have to be."

"Good," she said. "You can come to the terrace with me. I got approval."

Idonea's eyebrows raised. "Even from the Grand Templar?"

Kitsa grinned. "After the attempt on your life, he has agreed to some leniencies."

"Leniencies," Idonea repeated, laughing. "That's generous of him."

Together they crossed the snowy yard, their boots crunching through the frost, and slipped into the terrace home. The hidden passageway swallowed them in its dim coolness until they emerged into the secret chamber below. Kitsa gestured to the centre circle.

"We'll focus on Resonant manipulation today." She paused, her voice softening. "This will hopefully be a step towards recovering what was done to your mind."

Idonea's chest tightened. "I can sense it," she whispered. "The gaps. The moments that are... wrong."

Kitsa knelt beside her, placing a hand lightly over Idonea's. "We will untangle what has been done," she said. "But Resonance work is never gentle. You need to let the Current answer, even when it hurts."

Idonea nodded, throat tight. She took her glasses off and laid them beside her. She didn't need them for what Kitsa was teaching.

She inhaled, feeling for the familiar hum beneath her skin. The subtle shift as the Current stirred in her blood. Her nails lengthened, pupils thinning to vertical slits. The chamber's air vibrated faintly around her.

“Start small,” Kitsa said, her voice seemingly far away. “Choose a memory you trust. Something with a clear emotional anchor. Let its Resonance form your baseline.”

Idonea centred her focus on a single moment: her mother’s hand guiding hers through the shape of a ritual circle. Warm sunlight, the smell of crushed herbs, the certainty of being safe. The memory vibrated with a clean, steady frequency. She let herself harmonise with it, feeling the Resonance settle along her bones.

“Good,” Kitsa said. “Trace how far the harmony holds before you hit distortion.”

Idonea followed the Resonance outward. At first, it held, soft and sure … then wavered. A discord shivered through her skull. Shadows pressed at the edges of what she could see. She pulled back, adjusted, tried again.

The chamber dimmed around her. Her breathing grew loud in her ears. Sweat slid down her spine, and she pushed deeper.

Each attempt met the same resistance: a wall of tangled, off-key Resonance. She tried to slip between frequencies, to find where the tampering began, but the distortions repelled her like mismatched notes.

Her concentration buckled as pain flickered behind her eyes.

“I—” Idonea’s voice cracked. “I don’t think I can do this.”

Kitsa’s hand remained firm over hers. “You can,” she said gently. “Don’t try to force the distortion to break. Stabilise the Resonance you do have. Strengthen those harmonies. When they are strong enough, the false ones won’t be able to hold.”

Idonea swallowed hard, breath shaking, but nodded.

Her thoughts drifted to Elzhbeta. No one spoke of her; she remained completely unseen. Surely someone would've tracked her blood. The longer Elzhbeta remained hidden, the more time she had to act, or to vanish.

A cold knot tightened under Idonea’s ribs. She needed to find her, get answers, and find the relic.

Kitsa leaned closer. “Do not rush your mind, Idonea.”

Idonea closed her eyes again, pushing the thought of immediate pursuit to the back of her mind. For now, the task was inside her own head.

Her pulse thrummed too fast. Her own blood humming with the urge to act, to hunt. Sitting here wasn't helping. She got to her feet.

Kitsa's voice cut through the quiet. "The mind is a battlefield, Idonea. Treat it like one."

Idonea nodded, her jaw set. She didn't yet know the full extent of Elzhbeta’s plans.

Idonea looked around the room. “Is it okay if I stay for a moment?”

Kitsa eyed her warily but nodded. “Not too long.”

The door shut behind her. The chamber was hers alone now.

She didn't rise yet. She sat in the centre circle for a long time; what Kitsa had drawn out of her still hummed in her bones.

She was about to reach for her dagger when footsteps sounded in the passage. They stopped at the edge of the chamber. A tired sigh, then Lidiya stepped into the lamplight.

Lidiya wore her shawl drawn tight against her shoulders. Her hands were folded in her sleeves. Her face, in the chamber's low light, looked older than Idonea remembered.

She stopped two paces inside the room and didn't come further.

"Lidiya." Idonea's voice was steadier than she expected, though her hand had drifted instinctively towards her dagger.

"Don't be afraid."

"I'm not."

But her pulse had begun a slow, dreadful climb. She didn't lower her hand from the hilt immediately. She watched the older woman across the chamber, the lamplight finding the silver in Lidiya's hair, and she thought about the path down to the river, and the empty hands, and the way Lidiya had stopped them with that careful warning about the loose lichen.

Idonea measured her words. "You came to see me."

"I came," Lidiya said, "to see what you had decided."

Idonea's brow furrowed. "About what?"

"About my hands. The ones you've been wondering about." Lidiya's voice was very level. "The dirt under the nails the day Arina died. The way I was at the body. The way you saw me, and then didn't let yourself look at me."

Her grip on the dagger tightened, then slackened. "I—"

"I have known you were watching me. I have not minded." Lidiya's mouth curved. "There is a thing I do that looks, from outside, very much like the thing you were watching for."

Idonea's pulse was a slow, heavy drum in her throat. "What is the thing you do?"

Lidiya looked at her. Then she crossed the chamber and lowered herself to sit on a chair opposite Idonea. She didn't look at the dagger. Either she'd decided it wasn't a threat, or she'd decided it didn't matter.

"I keep the dead. The ones the Order will not."

"Lidiya."

"Two children have died in this village since your arrival. Three, if I have counted right. The third I am not sure of."

Idonea went very still.

Lidiya's eyes were on her, steady and patient. "Arina and Cleo. And Edik, who I have not seen in days. He brought his sister's painted box to me. He told me he wanted it kept somewhere the Templars wouldn't find. He said he would come back for it. He has not." A breath. "Edik didn't run, Idonea. I have been waiting for someone to tell me what happened to him. The Templars don't know he is gone. I have not said anything. I didn't know who I was waiting for, until now."

Idonea's throat closed entirely. She couldn't find anything to say.

"Tell me," Lidiya said.

"Lidiya—"

"Please, child. I have been carrying this alone. I would like to know."

Idonea drew a breath that didn't quite steady.

"He was killed in my cottage. In the bathtub. I found him there. The same wounds as Arina. The same sigil. We — we burned him, Lidiya. Lysander and I. In the basement furnace. We were afraid if anyone found him in my cottage, with that sigil over the body, I would be the next to die in a cell. We didn't tell anyone. We didn't — we couldn't even mourn him properly. He went into the furnace and then into the fjord. There was no body to bury. There was nothing left to keep."

A long, terrible silence.

Lidiya didn't weep, and her face didn't move. Only her hands changed — they came out of her sleeves and folded against the front of her shawl, and she pressed them there as if to hold herself together at the seam.

"I am sorry," Idonea whispered. "I am so sorry, Lidiya."

"Then he died because he saw what I'd begun to see, and someone wanted him silent before he could speak it. Did he have anything on him?"

"Dirt. From the chapel steps. In his fist. He had gone back to where she died. He had gathered some of the earth."

A broken sound came from Lidiya. "Of course he had. Of course he'd gone back."

"Lidiya—"

"I plaited her hair, Idonea. When she was little. I plaited her hair in my kitchen every Sunday for four years, after their mother went into the fields. Edik would sit at the table and watch and not speak. He was not a boy who spoke much. But he watched. He watched everything I did. He learned how to plait from watching me, and after Arina turned twelve she wouldn't let me do it anymore — she said she was too old, and Edik did it for her instead, every chapel-day, until the morning she died. He had been doing it for five years." Lidiya's voice didn't break, it only thinned. "He took her hand-painted box to me because I was the only adult who'd ever touched the hair of his sister. He didn't have a word for what I was to them. But he knew where to bring the box."

Idonea was crying. She didn't bother to wipe her face.

"I am going to find the woman who did this," she said.

"I know."

"I am going to find her and I am going to end this."

"I know that too, child. I have known since the day you came down the path to the river. I was not waiting to be sure. I was waiting for you to be sure."

Idonea nodded. She could not, for a long moment, speak again. When she could, she asked: "Will you open the box?"

"After. When this is done."

"Would you tell me what is inside?"

"Yes. When you come back."

Lidiya stood, slowly. The descent had aged her, and so had the past five minutes.

At the start of the passage, she paused. "Idonea."

"Yes."

"Thank you. For telling me. For not letting me wait any longer. I had — I had begun to think I would never know what had happened to him. I kept setting his place at the table, for weeks."

"I should've come sooner."

"You came. That's enough."

She turned and went up the passage. The footsteps were quieter on the way up than they had been on the way down. Idonea stood alone in the

chamber for some moments after they had faded. Her own hands had gone steady.

Idonea pulled her dagger free from its sheath, its weight familiar and cold in her palm. She was so tired of inaction, of being prey. If she was going to survive, she had to choose the hunter’s path.

She turned her left wrist upward and pressed the dagger's point to her skin. The pain was precise and unyielding. Blood welled in a thin crimson line, bright and hot and willing.

Idonea exhaled once, steadying her pulse.

From the pouch at her belt, she took a pinch of grey ash, a scatter of bone dust, and a grainy pinch of salt. Blood alone could call, but Riven work required anchoring. Without stabilisers, the ritual could unravel the caster’s mind before it found its mark. She pressed the ash to the fresh cut. The wound sizzled as the Current stirred. Then she added the bone dust, letting it cling to the blood, binding memory to intent. Lastly, she sprinkled the salt. The grain struck the blood and flared, a sharp spark of red-white light.

The ritual took.

A bloodthread rose from her wrist, thin as a hair and glowing with a pulsing red luminescence. It beat in perfect time with her heart. A lattice of delicate geometric lines unfolded around it, spiralling outward; a tracker’s weave, old and unkind and precise.

A ripple of cold passed through her bones. There was no turning back now.

She wrapped her wrist tightly with cloth, drew her cloak close around her shoulders, and slipped out the terrace house’s back door. The Templars, summoned by the supper bell, barely looked her way. Their distraction was the only opening she needed.

Moments later, the forest swallowed her whole. The snow gave under her boots as she walked. The air bit with winter’s teeth. The bloodthread floated ahead of her like a living ember dragged through the dark, weaving through the trees with purpose. Each breath left a pale plume trailing behind her.

The thread tugged sharply. Idonea followed.

Her ribs throbbed, wrist stung, and the ritual pulled at her blood with each step, but she pushed deeper into the frigid woods. Trees creaked under their burdens of snow.

A feminine voice drifted through the trees.

Idonea crouched low in the underbrush. She hadn’t expected to find Elzhbeta in the middle of the woods with nothing around. It didn’t seem to fit. She'd expected her at the veil tear.

She edged forward silently.

Elzhbeta knelt within a ring of sigils carved into the frozen earth. Her palms were spread, fingers trembling. But her palms were sealed. So, it wasn’t magic. Yet her lips moved in hushed, fervent words.

Then a second voice spoke.

Low, distorted, vast. It didn't belong in the human world. It was a rumble that rattled her bones. “***The relic is almost ready. Why do you bother me so? Speak.***”

Her blood ran cold. It must’ve been Vinea. He wasn’t fully there. His presence was stretched thin, manifested only through the sigils. But even his echo was enough to foul the air with the taste of iron and ash.

Elzhbeta bowed her head lower. “A witch hunts for your relic.”

The daemon’s chuckle was a sound like stone grinding against stone. “***You fool.***”

Idonea’s chest tightened. She wasn't getting a better chance than this.

She flexed her hand. The cut on her wrist opened again, willingly, and the Current came up her arm to meet the blood the way it always did.

Three shards. Thin as needles, brittle as glass; she'd never been able to hold them long. She flicked her wrist and they screamed across the clearing.

Elzhbeta's palms came up before her head did.

The shards shattered before they reached her. As the red sparks died in the snow, Idonea struck upon a sudden truth: she'd never seen Elzhbeta work magic before.

The daemon's voice changed register. "***Indeed, a fool.***" Then the pressure of him was gone, and the clearing was only a clearing, and the two of them in it.

Elzhbeta rose without hurry. "So," she said. "Now what."

Idonea stepped into the clearing. Her dagger was already in her hand; she didn't remember drawing it. The snow soaked cold through her boots.

"You should've killed me."

"I thought I had." Elzhbeta tilted her head.

The knife came from her sleeve so fast Idonea only saw it after it had thudded into the trunk beside her head. She hadn't seen Elzhbeta's hand

move at all. Her ribs flared where they had been stabbed in the cottage, a memory of pain her body had decided to revisit.

She opened her palm against the dagger's edge. The pain sharpened her and the blood went into the Current like ink into water, and a lash rose from her palm, slick and red and alive.

It struck the ground at Elzhbeta's feet. Snow fountained. Elzhbeta didn't move.

"Sloppy."

It was sloppy. The lash trembled violently in Idonea’s grip, refusing to hold shape. Untethered.

Her body knew before her mind did what she needed. She dragged the dagger across her palm again, in the same place, in the same line, mirroring the cut she'd left on Elzhbeta's forearm in the cottage. The pain went up her arm and out through her teeth as a sound she didn't recognise.

The wound found its twin across the clearing.

Elzhbeta's head jerked. She looked down at her own arm as the blood there rose to answer, and for the first time something passed over her face that wasn't composure. Not fear. Recognition. The look of a woman who'd just understood what she was fighting.

She sees it. She sees what I am. What my mother made me.

The lash steadied in her grip. She snapped it forward.

The first cut opened across Elzhbeta's shoulder. The second across her thigh.

Idonea's own shoulder and thigh opened with them.

She'd not expected that. Cold spread through her stomach. The mirror went both ways. The working wasn't using her blood. It was using her.

She was on one knee in the snow before she'd registered falling, her vision tilting, her glasses askew. The headache that had been waiting behind her eyes for hours arrived in full.

Elzhbeta steadied herself against a tree. Blood ran down her arm and dripped from her elbow. She was, Idonea saw, still smiling.

"You have no idea what a daemon-blessed witch can do."

"You are no witch." The words came out thicker than Idonea meant. "You are what they made you. You let him in because the Order took your hands and you couldn't think of anywhere else to put what was left of you."

Elzhbeta's smile didn't move, but something behind her eyes did.

The second knife came from somewhere under her cloak. Idonea got her lash up. The blade snapped sideways into the snow, but the impact ran back along the Current and slammed into her ribs where Elzhbeta had stabbed her in the cottage. The old wound and the new working agreed with each other that she should be on the ground, and she was.

Snow in her mouth. Iron taste. The lash gone.

Elzhbeta closed the distance the way a person walks towards a fire that's nearly out.

"You're working with him." Idonea got herself up on her hands. "Vinea. The relic. You—"

"I am working for a future." Elzhbeta crouched in front of her. Up close, the smile had something tired in it. "You wouldn't understand."

The knife was close enough now that Idonea could feel the cold of the blade against her cheek before it touched.

She had nothing left to throw. Her lash had failed. Her mirror had cut her as deeply as it had cut Elzhbeta. Her skull was a single white note.

She pressed her bloodied palm flat against the snow.

"Return," she whispered.

Her blood answered.

It was not much. She had little left to spend, and what she spent was clumsy. The cuts she'd opened on Elzhbeta didn't bleed harder, didn't tear wider. They only pulled, the way her own marks had pulled a moment before. A small thing. Enough to make Elzhbeta's weight wrong on her front foot.

Idonea lunged.

They went down together. Elzhbeta's knife skittered. Idonea got her forearm across the older woman's throat and her weight behind it and drove her back against the trunk of the nearest tree, and for a count of three they were close enough that Idonea saw the shape of Elzhbeta's pupils, which were a woman's pupils, not a daemon's, which was somehow worse.

She got the dagger to Elzhbeta's throat.

"Where is the relic."

Elzhbeta smiled. The smile was patient.

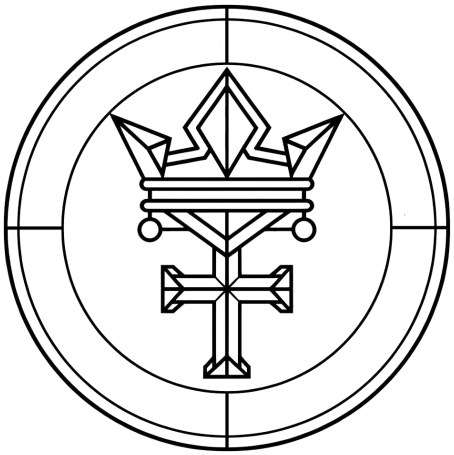
"You are weaker than I thought."

She slammed her palms into the tree. Sigils blazed bright, burning with a searing light. The blast was not large. It didn't need to be large. It was close.

The world went white at the edges and Idonea was in the snow again, ten paces from where she'd stood, her ribs full of the sound the blast had made. Snow in her lungs. She coughed and the coughing hurt in three new places. Somewhere above her, a branch creaked and fell.

From the corner of her eye came a streak of scales.

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Chapter 28

The strike came faster than a breath.

Lance’s body speared straight through Elzhbeta’s abdomen.

The sound was wet. Final.

Elzhbeta’s mouth opened in a soundless gasp as the force lifted her off her feet. Her body arced, then crashed into the snow in a spray of red.

Idonea’s eyes went wide. She couldn’t move, couldn't even inhale — she simply watched the steam of Elzhbeta’s blood rise into the freezing air. The wound was catastrophic: a torn tunnel of flesh and shattered bone, punched clean through her middle.

Lance wheeled above, twisting in a brutal, graceful loop. His wings cut the night like razors.

Idonea forced her legs to carry her forward. She dropped to her knees beside the dying woman.

"Elzhbeta."

The witch's eyes were huge, unblinking, startled more than afraid. A thin froth of blood bubbled at her lips as her chest shuddered. There was no spell, no poultice, no miracle that would save her.

"You weren't supposed to die."

The words came out weak. Her only lead to the relic was gone in an instant, gone with Elzhbeta's last breaths, drifting up into the cold air as steam.

Lance came down to the snow beside her. Lance held still. He didn't come to her.

She looked at him. He had decided. He was waiting to see if she understood.

"She would've run," Idonea said. "Wouldn't she."

Lance didn't move.

"She would've made it to the trees and I would've followed her and she would've killed me."

A low chuff. The closest he came to yes.

Idonea swallowed. Her throat hurt. He'd decided. Not her, him. The choice of his own judgment over the plan she'd not bothered to tell him because she'd not thought of him as something to tell, settled badly beneath her ribs.

"How did you know," she said. "Not just now, but with the others. The witch at the stall. You always know."

He blinked once, slowly, and pressed his head finally against her arm. She didn't have the answer. He didn't give it. But she put her hand on his scaled side; his heart raced. Idonea froze. He'd been afraid. He'd killed Elzhbeta because he couldn't let that happen.

She'd spent years telling herself she didn't particularly like him. She'd been wrong about that.

Idonea let out a slow breath and forced herself to think. She couldn’t linger, not with a body that Templars might stumble across. If they found her here, blood dripping from her own wounds and Elzhbeta’s corpse in the snow, there would be no explaining herself.

She scanned the clearing. The aftertaste of sulphur clung heavy in the air, tickling her throat.

Her stomach turned. The daemon’s presence remained still.

She glanced back at Elzhbeta’s body. Even in death, her lips were parted as if in a whisper. Idonea leaned closer, desperate, searching for anything. Her fingers brushed against the witch’s cloak, damp with blood, and found a satchel at her hip. She tore it open with shaking hands.

Inside was chalk, bone dust, and a folded scrap of parchment sealed in wax, but it bore no crest. She stuffed it into her cloak as Lance hissed again, wings flaring. His gaze was fixed on the tree line.

Idonea froze.

Shadows moved between the branches, too many to be mere animals. Templars.

Her pulse spiked. She looked down at the corpse.

“No time,” she said. “We need to move.”

Lance uncoiled, his scales shimmering brighter, as if in agreement.

Idonea drew her cloak tight, wiping the worst of Elzhbeta’s blood from her hands onto the snow, and rose to her feet. She spared one last glance at

the corpse, who still carried secrets she desperately needed. Her teeth clenched. Secrets she would've to unearth another way.

Lance darted ahead, his body weaving between trees. Behind them, voices carried, sharp, clipped, and growing closer.

“Over there!”

“Circle wide.”

Idonea pushed harder, each inhale a stab in her ribs. She ducked low, using the trees for cover. Lance streaked past her ankles, darting up a trunk, his wings rippling as he sprang to another branch, his body silent but for the faint whistle of air.

She darted left, sliding between two thick trunks. Her boots skidded on ice, and she barely caught herself against the bark.

The forest swallowed her.

Lance slithered ahead, pausing at intervals, his gaze flashing back to her, urging her on. He moved like an arrow, as if he knew exactly where to go. She didn’t question it and followed.

At last, the voices of the Templars quieted, swallowed by the woods. She collapsed against a tree, snow spraying up around her. Lance coiled at her feet, his tongue flickering.

“Good work,” she said, reaching down to touch his scales. They pulsed faintly, still humming with residual Current.

Her head dropped back against the bark, heart hammering.

A coldness swept over her body. Lance let out a low hiss. She had to get back to the cottage before any of the Templars thought to check on her presence. If she was absent, Kitsa would likely be in trouble too. Any leniencies granted, removed.

She pushed off the tree and limped forward, Lance gliding at her side, his eyes glowing in the dark. The snow muffled their passage, and behind them, the forest returned to silence.

By the time she neared the village perimeter, her legs shook with exhaustion. She dropped into a crouch, scanning. Two Templars were stationed by the fountain. Their breath plumed in the cold, their hands loose on their weapons. At least they were not at the door.

Though, still too close. Idonea’s jaw tightened. She couldn’t let them see her bloodied cloak, the cut at her wrist, or Lance.

She whispered, “Stay close.”

The Iaculus slipped into the dark, his scales blurring against the snow.

Idonea drew her cloak tighter and waited for the right moment. The sentries turned, speaking to one another. She darted low across the ground, boots barely audible.

Her hand trembled as she lifted the latch and the door gave with a soft creak. Inside, the air was warmer, tinged with the light scent of herbs.

She shut the door and leaned against it, letting the weight of the day press into her spine. Her eyes squeezed shut. *Just one breath. One moment of stillness. Before everything collapses again.*

A soft nudge at her ribs snapped her from the fragile quiet.

Her eyes flew open. Lance was beside her, coils shifting restlessly on the floorboards. He shouldn't have followed her into the cottage. There was no Current here. *Did he risk himself just to stay near me? Fool creature. Loyal creature.*

She gave him a once-over, pulse quickening. No visible signs of strain. No tremor in his wings.

Then he nudged her again, harder this time.

"What?" she said.

Lance hissed low in his throat and spat two objects onto the floorboards, the sound sharp in the quiet cottage.

Idonea blinked, then her eyes widened.

She crouched, breath hitching as she reached towards them. Nellith's ring lay twisted in the thin layer of dust, unmistakable. But beside it, sat something far worse.

A golden earring inlaid with garnet: an earring Nellith wore every day.

Idonea swallowed hard and gathered the pieces with trembling fingers. They were cold. Too cold. *She wouldn't drop these. Not unless she was—no. Don't go there.*

"You found her?" Her voice came out strained. She forced herself to meet Lance's eyes fully.

He bobbed his head in a jerky nod and hissed once.

"Is she close?"

Another nod, followed immediately by a sharp shake of his head.

"So she is," Idonea said, "but … isn't?"

Lance's wings flared outward, then tucked back in; his version of a helpless shrug. Idonea let out a long breath. *Wonderful. Cryptic riddles from a creature who communicates in hisses and head-bobs. Completely useless.*

“We will save her,” she said, though the promise sat heavy and terrifying in her chest.

Lance flicked his tongue out, tasting the air, and then darted towards the bedroom in a blur of onyx scales.

Idonea’s stomach twisted. If the Templars burst into the cottage, they'd spot him instantly. *And they would drag him off. Or worse.*

She clenched Nellith’s jewellery in her fist. She couldn’t let that happen, not to Lance.

Who knew what the Grand Templar would do?

Idonea pushed the table aside and tried the trap door once more, but to no avail. It was still locked tight.

“Lance,” she called.

A low hiss came from the bedroom.

“Lance, now,” she said again.

He darted into the room, wings flaring.

Idonea gestured down at the trap door. “We need this opened.”

Lance spiralled upward to the ceiling and dove towards the ring. Wood splintered as he smashed through it.

Idonea’s gaze darted to the door, waiting, but no Templar burst through. She hauled the hatch up and followed him down into the space, easing the trap door shut behind her.

“You should wait here until it is safe,” Idonea said.

Lance flew around Lysander’s work benches. Idonea turned her attention to the passageway that led to the hatch into Alcaeus’s study. Had that been locked too?

She headed towards Alcaeus’s hatch, avoiding looking towards the hidden room.

A voice carried faintly through the wood. Her father’s.

Idonea froze, her hand hovering just short of the iron latch.

“… could happen under your watch,” the Grand Templar said, his tone sharp and measured. “Elzhbeta should've remained shackled.”

“That choice was not mine,” Alcaeus replied. “If what you say is true, then she was responsible for the daemon attacks.”

“She was attempting something,” the Grand Templar continued, voice tight. “The sigils were daemonic in nature. But whatever it was, it drew attention. Something other than that daemon is out there.”

Idonea pressed herself flatter against the wall, heart hammering. Lance coiled at her feet, hissing.

“No human killed Elzhbeta?” Alcaeus asked.

The Grand Templar’s voice dropped to a whisper. “No human. Perhaps a witch. A Riven?”

“Idonea was confined to her cottage. It was not her.”

There was a long silence. Idonea held her breath, every nerve alive.

“Ensure the site is cleansed,” the Grand Templar said. “We will attempt to draw the daemon out tomorrow night.”

“Of course, Brother,” Alcaeus said.

The Grand Templar exhaled, a low, tense sound. “Good. Then we proceed.”

A set of footsteps receded. Idonea let out a deep breath.

If the Grand Templar was going to draw the daemon out, did that mean Lysander was back already?

She glanced down at Lance, who nudged her leg. She drew a hand across her face. “We have work to do,” she whispered.

She crept back towards her own hatch, every step cautious. She pushed it up just enough to slip through. Before she could stop him, Lance slithered through. The cottage was quiet, as was outside.

Her eyes drifted to the Lodamante encasing her prison, its dull metal pulsing faintly with the Eitr that strangled Current. Like standing beside a sleeping beast. It sat above her like a challenge.

She started with the door. It was the only segment in easy reach. She wouldn’t dismantle half the cottage, not yet.

Idonea knelt before it, fingers trembling with exhaustion and adrenaline. She drew her dagger and pressed the blade to her wrist. Warm blood welled instantly. She caught it in her palm and smeared it across the cold metal. The Lodamante drank the heat greedily, but no Current seeped through in return.

Lance fluttered his wings beside her, nervous or impatient, it was hard to tell with dragonkin.

“Come on,” she said.

She dipped two fingers into the trickle of blood along her arm, then reached for her satchel. Blood was never enough alone. Blood opened, but ash bound, salt sharpened, and bone dust stabilised.

She sprinkled a pinch of bone dust across the blood smear, watching the pale grit cling to the crimson streaks. She dragged the mixture into sigils, old ones, from Nellith's teachings, the kind that burned rather than glowed.

Nothing, not even the faintest nibble of Current from the other side. The Lodamante remained blank, cold, stubbornly untouched.

Of course it did. Dozens of witches must've tried before her. Riven magic couldn't break the metal. She'd hoped her blood might have been enough to slip through.

"Fine," she said under her breath.

She lifted the dagger again. If blood and ash weren't enough, then she needed depth. Sigils cut into the metal itself, not laid overtop. Carved sigils held shape. Carved sigils forced the metal to respond.

She scraped the blade into the Lodamante, metal screeching as she gouged the first line. Blood beaded along the grooves as she carved the symbol and let it drip, her blood tracing the pattern like a river finding its bed.

This time, the Lodamante vibrated. A low, steady thrum. A rhythm that matched her pulse. A response. Weak, but real.

She sat back on her heels, breathing hard.

What am I missing?

Riven rituals required balance. Blood, bone, and will. But the claws, her claws, were another thing entirely. They were older than Lodamante, older than Riven rituals even.

Idonea stared at her hands, flexing them. Sensed the emptiness where Current should flow. She'd never called the claws without Current before. Her mouth went dry.

"Lance."

He lifted his long, scaled head.

"I need you to bite me."

He hissed low and uncertain.

"I know. I wouldn't ask if I had another way."

He circled her arm, rolling up her sleeve. She braced herself as Lance opened his jaws and clamped down, not enough to break bone, but enough to trigger the instinct buried beneath her skin.

Pain flared, sharp and bright. She gasped, breath shuddering.

Come on. Claws, respond.

Dragonkin were tied to Current, but clearly not dependent on it. And whatever twist of lineage had put claws under her skin, might be the same.

She clenched her hands until her knuckles whitened.

Her nails lengthened, blackened, curling into the hooked points she needed.

A shaky laugh escaped her. “Good. Let go.”

Lance unwound from her arm, his tongue flicking in approval.

Idonea turned back to the door and replaced steel with bone and claw. The claws carved deeper than the dagger ever could, slicing through Lodamante like it begrudged resisting her. Ash and blood filled the grooves. Bone dust settled in the cracks. She carved until her shoulders trembled, until her vision blurred, until hours passed in a haze of metal dust and iron scent.

Then a subtle shift, but unmistakable. Her heart jumped.

Idonea slapped her bloodied palm across the newest sigil, pressing so hard her arm shook. The Lodamante grew warm beneath her hand. The Eitr thrummed, then loosened.

Current stirred, faint, thin, but there. Relief hit first, then something colder. Ordinary witches couldn't do this. Blood dripped down her wrist into the sigil, feeding it. The marks along her back burned faintly beneath her clothes.

She flexed her fingers and sensed the Current coursing again, free enough to answer.

Lance butted her with his head.

“We did it,” she whispered, afraid that saying it aloud might undo it.

The link was weak, temporary, but if she carved every Lodamante surface in the cottage the same way … She would've Current back.

Idonea pressed her hand to the door again. The metal hummed like a living thing beneath her touch.

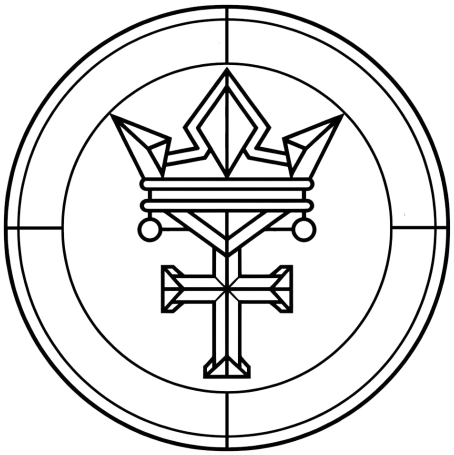
Her muscles shook with exhaustion, but a tired smile tugged at her mouth.

She would go further tomorrow. She had to.

Idonea guided Lance to the bedroom. He curled beside her the moment she collapsed onto the mattress.

She stared at the sigil on the door until sleep dragged her under.

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Chapter 29

Idonea found herself alone for the day, not even Kitsa graced her door. Which was a blessing for there was a lot of blood near the door.

Her arms and ribs ached from cleaning and fighting, while her head pounded from thoughts of the Grand Templar. At curfew, the Templars made sure to lock her in again. Not that she'd left.

She exhaled and crossed to the window. The frame creaked as she leaned into it, tracing a thread of Current along her palm. Since breaking through the Lodamante's chokehold, the Current obeyed her eagerly, humming at her command. She pushed a needle of Current outward.

The latch on the door snapped open. She slid out silently, cutting across the night towards the stables. She would wait there. The Grand Templar had promised to draw the daemon out, and she needed to see how.

And why Lysander still hadn't returned.

The thought sat heavy, an iron stone in her stomach.

She pressed her back against the stable's shadowed doorframe.

Boots on snow, disciplined, unhurried. Her breath hitched. The Grand Templar strode at the head of a company of armed Templars, his cloak brushing along the frost.

And bound between two of them, shrouded in a pale robe, was Kitsa. Idonea's stomach heaved — they had dressed her like an offering. Her nails bit into the splintered wood.

Daemons don't want innocence. They want anchors.

Kitsa writhed against the Templars' hold, her shrill voice carrying into the night. "Let me go!"

The men dragged her like she weighed nothing, the snow sprayed under her kicking feet.

"Brother Alcaeus," she sobbed, turning her head desperately.

Alcaeus walked near the rear guard, his face pale, his jaw locked tight. Idonea's heart clenched. He didn't speak, but she saw the storm in his eyes. He hated this as much as she did, yet he did nothing.

Idonea remained in the shadows, her body rigid. Every part of her screamed to rush out, to shield Kitsa, to spit defiance into the Grand Templar's face. But another part held her still. This was her chance to watch him. To see the truth beneath the Grand Templar's mask when no audience but his loyalists surrounded him.

Did Alcaeus know what was about to happen? Did he suspect the Grand Templar's true intent?

When the procession moved down the trail, Idonea crept after them, keeping low, boots sinking silently into the thin crust of snow.

Kitsa's screams grew faint as they approached the river. A Templar hefted her over his shoulder like a sack of flour, her legs kicking, her sobs slicing through the cold.

Idonea's teeth ground together.

They crossed the icy water with quick efficiency, Kitsa's thrashing barely slowing them.

They stopped at a clearing among the trees. Torches guttered as the Grand Templar ordered them extinguished. One of the Templars lashed Kitsa to a tree. Rope bit into her arms, and her voice broke into ragged sobs.

Idonea's stomach twisted. How could Alcaeus stand by? How could he not tear her free? Yet still he said nothing, bound by their chain of command.

The Grand Templar stepped into the centre, the circle of Templars closing around him. Idonea crouched low, edging closer. The cold air was sharp in her lungs. She reached out with her senses, brushing against the Current; it recoiled instantly. Something vast moved beyond the veil, a disturbance that rattled the marrow of her bones.

Her hair prickled against her scalp. The forest light dimmed unnaturally. The silence was unbearable.

Branches cracked. A low rustle, heavy. The sound of the forest fleeing. Creatures scrambled through brush. An exhalation like a storm wind carried through the clearing.

Kitsa screamed.

Idonea's gut knotted as the daemon stepped from the shadows.

It was a Leshak, a forest guardian’s body hollowed out and puppeteered by a Lesser Noble daemon, its anchor sigil burned into its chest like a brand. Idonea's stomach tightened. Elzhbeta had been in the forest, for this.

Its skin was bark-grey and cracked, glowing from within as if something simmered beneath it. Vines hung from its limbs, twitching with stolen life. Its antlers were jagged, split, blackened with daemon-fire. Its eyes burned a sickly, unnatural yellow.

Its body cast no shadow.

The forest light glowed faintly around it, a poisonous green haze. The air thickened, sharp with the reek of resin and rot.

Idonea’s breath broke. *Was this why Elzhbeta was in the forest?*

This monster was older than the village. Older than the Templars. A thing bound to the land and corrupted through a sigil she couldn't yet see.

Idonea knew this daemon was not responsible for the witches’ deaths.

The Leshak advanced, whip-vines sprouting from its arms, dragging across the snow.

The Templars raised their weapons, but none moved.

The Grand Templar raised his blade, voice ringing false and loud. “Back, daemon!”

The creature didn’t even turn its head. Its gaze drifted to Kitsa, slow and calculating.

Idonea slid closer. Her fingers flew across the ropes binding Kitsa.

“Keep quiet,” she whispered.

Kitsa’s body stiffened, then stilled. Her breath came shallow. Idonea worked faster, heart hammering.

The Grand Templar shouted again. His men stirred, weapons scraping against armour.

“Hold it!”

The Leshak crouched low, whip lashing, and the ground trembled.

Idonea tore through the final knot. Kitsa sagged against her, freed at last, and she guided her gently behind the tree. For one stupid heartbeat, Idonea nearly hugged her.

Then she stepped out. The Current surged around her, eager, violent. It recognised the daemon’s presence as surely as it recognised her blood. She’d pricked her thumb with her dagger.

She spread her fingers wide, the air crackling around her.

The Templars turned, eyes widening.

“Idonea,” Alcaeus gasped. “No! Run!”

But she couldn’t. The Current clawed at her ribs, demanding release. She dug her heels into the earth, nostrils flaring as the first warmth of blood tickled her upper lip.

The daemon’s whip cracked, striking sparks against armoured shields. Templars flew backward, and the circle collapsed into chaos.

Idonea drew in deeper. Current folded around her palms like molten glass. Her vision shimmered. The daemon’s form swam, too close, too sharp.

“Brothers!” the Grand Templar said, voice high with alarm. “Subdue the witch before she turns it upon us!”

He retreated backwards, away from the daemon, letting others take the brunt.

Idonea gritted her teeth. *Liar. Coward.*

The daemon locked its eyes on her. It smelled her power, her blood, her will. It lunged.

Idonea flung her palms forward.

Current exploded from her hands, a blast of molten force that lit the trees in a blinding arc.

The daemon staggered, shrieking.

A vine whipped out blindly and wrapped around Alcaeus’ throat.

“No!” Idonea screamed, stumbling forward.

The vine yanked him off his feet, slamming him into the snow. Green venom hissed where it tore his skin.

Another blast of Current erupted from her palms, driving the daemon back.

Its vines curled inward. Its body shuddered. It crashed into the tree line, and vanished into the dark.

The blast she'd given it had severed the sigil burned into its chest. Without the anchor sigil, a Lesser Noble couldn't hold a stolen form. It couldn't stay on the mortal plane. The Leshak's body would've collapsed back into an ordinary guardian tree somewhere deep in the pines.

The silence that followed was unbearable.

Idonea crawled to Alcaeus, hands shaking. His breath was shallow, veins darkening, his skin pale with creeping poison.

“Idonea…” His hand brushed her cheek, weak, trembling.

She pressed her fingers against his neck. The poison pulsed under her fingertips. The sight of him punched straight through her chest. Not him, not now.

Kitsa dropped beside her, eyes wide with horror. “He’s dying.”

Idonea’s breath came ragged, her head throbbed from the strain. Blood streaked her nose. “Leshak venom. We can mend flesh — but poison…”

Kitsa shook her head, frantic. “No.”

The Grand Templar loomed above, flanked by armoured Templars. His face was shadowed, unreadable.

“Take Brother Alcaeus,” he commanded, gesturing to the Templar. “Bring him to the Templar house. There, he will be treated in safety.”

Idonea’s arms tightened around her father. “No.”

The word was sharp, feral. The Templars froze.

“I won’t let you take him.” She glared up at the Grand Templar, her teeth bared. “I’ll deal with him.”

The Grand Templar’s eyes narrowed, but he didn’t press. His men shifted uneasily.

Behind her cloak, Idonea’s hand brushed the tiny bee pinned to her sleeve. She whispered a word of activation. The charm buzzed faintly, carrying her signal into the night.

But the moment she drew her hand back to Alcaeus’s chest, metal clamped down on her wrists.

She gasped, twisting, but two masked Templars forced her arms behind her back. A third shoved her to her knees in the snow. Her breath punched out of her lungs, hot against the icy air.

“Restrain her,” the Grand Templar said coolly.

Idonea stared at him. Half the men around him would be dead if she hadn't arrived, and still he looked at her like she was the threat.

Kitsa screamed, lunging towards Idonea, but another Templar grabbed her by the collar and yanked her backward. She hit the ground hard, a thin cry escaping her throat.

“No!” Idonea bucked against the grip on her arms. The cuffs were Lodamante. Her veins still burned from the clash with the daemon, her head pounding, her nose crusted with drying blood.

The Grand Templar knelt, his blade gleaming faintly in the moonlight. His eyes were calm, clinical. “A dangerous display tonight, witch. You

would claim you sought to protect us all, but we saw it. Your hand turned the daemon towards us. Toward Alcaeus.”

“That’s a lie!” She spat. “You hid behind your Brothers and let it tear at them. You would've let it kill him.”

His expression didn’t change. “Lies are the weapons of witches. Truth belongs to the Order.” He straightened, signalling with two fingers.

The Templars moved as one, lifting Alcaeus from the snow. He groaned feebly, his head lolling against his chest.

Idonea’s heart seized. She lunged, only to be wrenched back down into the snow, the iron grip bruising her shoulders. “Don’t touch him! He’ll die if you take him.”

“He will be tended,” the Grand Templar said. “We don't entrust our Brothers to heresy.”

“Your mending can’t touch poison!” Her words cracked with desperation, thick with blood and grief. “You’ll let it spread. You’ll let him suffer.”

The Grand Templar tilted his head, studying her as if she were a specimen under glass. “Then his fate will serve as judgement. Whether he rises with the Order’s blessing or falls by the witch’s corruption.”

Idonea’s stomach dropped. He was gambling Alcaeus’s life to prove a point. She writhed against the restraints, snow biting into her knees. Kitsa sobbed, fighting against the Templar that held her, her fists striking uselessly against plate.

“Let her go!” Kitsa’s pitch was frenzied. “She saved you all! She saved him!”

The Grand Templar ignored her. He turned, his cloak sweeping over the snow, and began the march back towards the village. The others followed, carrying Alcaeus’s limp body between them.

Idonea was dragged after, boots scraping ruts into the frost, her arms bound behind her back. None of the Templars met her eyes.

Every breath rasped. Every step stabbed at her ribs. She twisted her head, straining to keep her eyes on Alcaeus as the Templars bore him away. His breath still came, shallow but steady.

Hold on, she begged silently.

Kitsa stumbled behind, her cheeks streaked with tears. When they reached the edge of the village, a Templar shoved her forward and released her.

“Go,” the Grand Templar said flatly. “You are no prisoner.”

Kitsa froze, trembling.

“If you value your life, girl, you will step away from her shadow.”

The words should not have hurt, but they did. Kitsa hovered, long enough for Idonea to feel something inside her lift, and then she turned and fled into the dark.

Idonea watched her go. Rationally, she knew Kitsa chose survival. Emotionally, it cut like a betrayal.

Idonea’s chest tightened. *At least she was free*, she told herself, clinging to the fragile comfort.

The Templars marched her through the last stretch alone. When they reached her cottage, they opened the door wide and forced her inside. Her knees smacked the floorboards. Someone tore the cuffs from her wrists, her skin throbbed.

The Grand Templar loomed in the doorway. “You will remain here,” he said, voice heavy with command. “And I will figure out who let you out.”

He turned away, his cloak sweeping the threshold, and the door slammed shut.

The cottage swallowed the sound.

Idonea knelt where she'd fallen, chest heaving, wrists raw. The room was too small, the shadows too thick.

Her stomach twisted. Her hands wouldn’t stop shaking.

A faint rustle sounded above her. Idonea lifted her head.

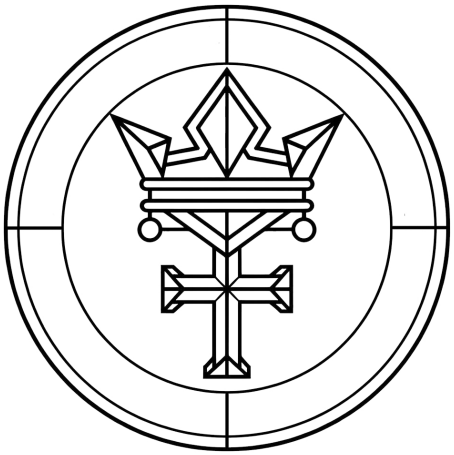
Lance slithered out from the rafters. His eyes fixed on her, full of a knowing she hated being seen with. He wound himself around her shoulders, warmth spreading across her trembling muscles.

Her fingers dug into the floorboards, breath catching. Lance pressed his head beneath her jaw, a soft keen vibrating through his body.

"Don't think about it," she told Lance.

Lance didn't answer. She held him there.

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Chapter 30

The cottage was quiet, save for the soft, restless hiss of Lance.

Idonea balanced on the table, fingers brushing along one of the Lodamante bars embedded across the ceiling. Unlike the door, now faintly responsive, its hum whispering under her skin, this metal was dead, cold and unyielding.

"Lance," she said, arm outstretched, "if you will."

He flew up to her, coiling around her wrist. She braced herself. His fangs sank into her skin with efficient pressure.

Pain flared, bright and grounding. It sent a pulse through her blood, the same primal spark that had triggered her claws before.

As his bite loosened, Idonea lifted her arm overhead. Blood oozed, warm against the cold metal of the bar. She carved sigils into the Lodamante with the claws; deep grooves, sharp strokes.

Her blood ran down, trying to fill the etched shapes. It slid right off.

"Consarn," she muttered, teeth clenched.

More sigils, and more blood. It spattered the table, flecked across her boots, dripped to the floor. The Lodamante drank none of it.

Her shoulders trembled with the effort of holding her arms up. Her vision pulsed at the edges. Her blood was strangely thin, but she refused to stop. She couldn't stop, not when the bar above her sat unchanged, untouched by her work.

She tried again, scoring the grooves harder, forcing her claws to deepen the cuts. Blood followed her movements in shimmering lines.

Still nothing.

A rasp built in her chest, frustration rising sharp enough to taste. Her hands shook. She wanted to scream.

Lance nudged her shoulder once, then slipped away. When he returned, he dropped something at her feet: a paintbrush.

Idonea blinked. A faint, incredulous smile tugged at her mouth. “That may work.”

He hissed proudly.

She opened another cut along her forearm. She dipped the paintbrush into the running crimson and drew it along the sigils carved into the bar. The brush carried the blood more steadily than her trembling fingers could. The grooves drank it at last.

The metal vibrated. The smallest flutter beneath her palm, but it was enough. A sliver of Current bled through, feather-light, but unmistakable.

Her breath left her in a thin shudder. She repeated the strokes until her head pounded with the effort. Her ears rang. The air wavered.

By the time the latch scraped at the cottage door, her vision was swimming. She nearly pitched off the table, catching herself on shaking limbs as she climbed down. Her cloak hid her arms poorly, but she pulled it close anyway. Lance disappeared up into the rafters.

The door swung open.

Lysander filled the doorway. Snow clung to his hair and cloak, melting in quiet rivulets down the leather. His gaze swept the room once, then locked onto her with a force that scraped down her spine.

“You look…” His voice caught. “You look like hell, Idonea.”

She stalked towards him. “You left.”

“I had to.” His voice frayed on the edges. “You don’t understand—”

“No,” she said. “You don’t understand.”

Her hand went to the dagger at her hip. His eyes widened, but he didn’t move.

“I almost died. Twice.” The words trembled with more than anger.

A muscle in his jaw ticked. “Idonea—”

She slammed him back against the wall, the tip of her dagger driving beneath his ribs. His breath punched out of him.

“Stop.”

Lysander’s chest rose and fell hard, his hands spread against the wall as he let her pin him there.

“You think I wanted to leave?” he snapped. “You think I haven’t been ripping myself apart every moment since?”

“Then why?” The question was a raw wound.

He swallowed. He didn’t answer.

She pressed the blade deeper. “Tell me why.”

His throat worked, his jaw tightened, and he fought it.

“Because I couldn’t be the reason they hurt you,” he said. “Because every time I look at you, all I see is the next way the world will take you from me.”

Her breath stilled.

His gaze dropped to her mouth.

“And I don’t know,” he whispered, “if I could survive that.”

The air between them tensed.

Idonea thought of Jovana, of the long months when the consumption took her piece by piece, and of how Jovana had never once asked Idonea to step back from it. Death had taken her, not fear.

Her hand trembled, not because she doubted him, but because she understood.

She dragged the dagger away from his ribs and slid it up, along his chest, his throat, until the blade rested beneath his jaw. His breath hitched. So did hers.

Her voice dropped to a whisper. “If you leave again, Lysander, I will hunt you. Because loving me is a choice, not a sacrifice.”

His pulse thrashed beneath the point of her knife.

“Good,” he said.

Her hand shook. That annoyed her. She kissed him before she could think better of it.

Idonea gasped, and he used the moment to deepen the kiss, his hand sliding up her spine.

She kissed him back, meeting him stroke for stroke, challenge for challenge. When he angled his head and pressed in again, slower this time, deeper, her whole body trembled.

He broke away only long enough to breathe against her lips, “Tell me to stop.”

She kissed him instead, longer, lingering until he groaned into her mouth. His hands framed her face now, thumbs stroking her cheekbones as he kissed her again and again, each one slower, more deliberate. Her thoughts scattered completely.

Idonea tore away from him the moment her breath shuddered, palms splayed against his chest.

His gaze dipped to where her cloak failed to hide the blood running in thin cascades down her arm. He dragged the fabric back with the barest

scrape of his fingers.

“Witchling,” he said. “You’ll destroy yourself.”

She hated how much she wanted to lean back into his warmth. She hated how much she wanted to do it again. She needed a distraction, from him, from his lips.

“Alcaeus,” she forced out. “Tell me he’s alive.”

Lysander’s eyes softened, though his hand lingered at her wrist, thumb brushing once, in measured movements, against the edge of her pulse. He never used his mechanical hand when he wanted to feel her. “Yes. Alive.”

Her chest seized with relief. “Take me to him.”

He hesitated, still close enough that she could feel the heat radiating from his body, the snow melting into dampness on his cloak. His gaze dropped to her lips for a fleeting, dangerous heartbeat, then flicked back to her eyes.

And then, with a low exhale, he released her hand.

Lysander’s exhale hung in the stillness between them. Then he turned, drawing his cloak tighter around him. “We have to move quickly. The Templars double patrols at night. If they catch us near the hospice, neither of us will leave it freely.”

Her knees still wobbled, but she refused to let him see the weakness. “Lead, then.”

He reached for the door, then paused, his hand hovering there. Without looking back, he murmured, “Stay close. No matter what.”

The words brushed along her skin like a touch, sparking down her spine.

They slipped into the night. The snow muffled most sound, but every crunch of their boots set her nerves on edge. The air was sharp enough to bite, the sky heavy with clouds that smothered the stars.

When they approached the edge of the square, he lifted a hand to halt her, then pulled her into the shelter of a half-collapsed shed. His body was close, his breath warm where it ghosted against her temple.

“Two of them,” he whispered, eyes flicking to the patrolling Templars. “Wait until they pass.”

She nodded, though his chest against her shoulder made it hard to focus on anything but the hammering of her own heart.

When the Templars passed, Lysander’s hand lingered a fraction longer at her waist before pulling away. “Come,” he said, too low, too rough.

He guided her without hesitation, his palm grazing her back to steady her when she stumbled over icy ruts.

“You’ve done this before,” she muttered.

“I never liked staying still for long,” he replied, a ghost of a smile tugging at his mouth.

She smiled in return, but then the ache in her ribs flared, reminding her why they risked all this. “How bad is he?” she asked, voice tightening.

Lysander didn’t answer immediately. He vaulted a low fence, then offered her his hand. She hesitated only a moment before taking it. His grip was firm, steadying, warmer than it should've been in the winter night.

“Bad,” he said, once she’d landed beside him. His thumb brushed across her knuckles before he let go. “He’s holding on, but … the poison’s stubborn. Kitsa has tried everything she knows.”

Her throat constricted. “Then he needs me.”

“He needs you alive,” Lysander replied. His gaze locked on hers in the dim. “Don’t burn yourself away trying to save him.”

She didn’t answer, couldn’t.

They reached the hospice, an old stone outbuilding at the edge of the town. She hadn't even known it existed. The torchlight on the front door painted the snow gold where two guards stood watch.

"Consarn," Idonea muttered.

Lysander’s lips brushed close to her ear as he leaned in. “There’s another way.”

Her pulse leapt. “What way?”

He tilted his head towards the back, so near his hair brushed her cheek. “Trust me.”

She did.

They circled wide, sticking to the shadows of the wall. When they reached a boarded window, Lysander crouched and pried loose one plank. Then he looked up at her, offering his clasped hands.

“Step here. I’ll lift you through.”

Idonea hesitated. “And you?”

“I’ll follow.” His eyes gleamed in the dim light with certainty.

She set her boot in his palms, and he lifted her like she weighed nothing. She gripped the stone sill, hauled herself through, and dropped into the dim interior.

A moment later, Lysander slipped through after her, landing silently at her side. The world narrowed to just the two of them, pressed close in the dark, his shoulder brushing hers.

“Stay quiet,” he murmured, voice low enough to curl right into her chest.

Together, they crept down the corridor towards Alcaeus’s chamber.

And when Idonea pressed her hand to the door to her father’s room, she couldn't tell whether the tightness in her chest came from Lysander or the door.

Lysander didn't follow her in.

Idonea found Alcaeus pallid as paper, sweat beading along his brow despite the cold. She knelt at the edge of the cot and took his hand. The skin was damp and warm under her fingers, pulse fluttering like a trapped bird.

Tears pricked at her eyes; a sob lodged stubborn in her throat.

“Idonea,” Alcaeus said, his voice steady. He gave her fingers a soft squeeze. “I’m glad you’re not hurt.”

She swallowed. “I’m sorry,” she said. “I should’ve—” Her words splintered. There were so many if onlys snarled in her mouth. “I would’ve been fine.”

He worked at swallowing. The motion looked like effort. A husky cough racked him and a speck of blood gathered at the corner of his mouth. Idonea pressed her forehead against his fever-hot arm.

“Remember,” he rasped, voice frayed. “I’ll do anything to see you unharmed.”

She tried to apologise again, but he shook his head.

“Do not apologise.” His breath was shallow. “None of this is your fault.”

His free hand found her hair and brushed through it with a tenderness that made her stomach ache.

“Father … I—” she began.

A surprised smile tugged at his colourless lips. “I never thought I’d hear you say that again, daughter.” There was something wry in the half-formed humour of it, an attempt to anchor them both to something human.

Idonea steadied herself with a long, steadying breath. "I can — look, I can save you. I know how. I just need—"

"Idonea."

"What?"

"I know you can. That isn't what I'm afraid of."

She leaned down and pressed her mouth to his cheek.

“Idonea. There is … something I must say.”

“Anything,” she answered before she caught herself, because there was no space left for hesitation.

“You need to know the truth about your mother,” Alcaeus said, and his voice carried the weight of something long kept.

The floor tilted. “What truth?” she asked, though some part of her already feared the answer.

He closed his eyes and let out a shaky breath. Every swallow looked like a hill to climb. The skin along his neck still showed the angry marks of the vine, and a sudden helplessness rose in her at how little healing they had done. “You won’t like what I tell you. But it’s the truth.”

Her pulse sped, a drum in her ears. “Tell me.”

Alcaeus’s voice was quieter now, as if the words themselves might cut. “Nellith … she was one of the first.” He watched her for the reaction, for the way the news would land. “One of the firstborn when the dragons walked the world. Old as the turning of the stones. Perhaps the legends are true, perhaps she is more kin to dragons than to us.”

Cold spread through her. The world went so still, the crackle of the hearth embers filled the silence. The walls pressed inward, crowding her.

The implication pressed on her ribs: a lineage braided with old, dangerous things. The idea that destruction threaded through her family, made her feel both ancient and monstrously small.

Alcaeus tried for a smile, and it shook. “She was … the firstborn of a darkness. It runs in her veins. Dyota and you aren't her only children.”

The words struck some chord deep inside her, a resonance she didn’t yet understand. If Nellith had other children, what had she done with them? The question turned her stomach.

“How can this be?” she said.

“I can see it in you,” Alcaeus said. “Something in your eyes tells me you know this is true. She kept me captive for years. I escaped when I used Dyota against her. I wanted to take you with me, but I could not.” His memory fractured into a quiet, bitter hitch. “I’m sorry I couldn't save you then.”

“She’d never harm me." The thought arrived before reason caught it.

He shook his head. “She uses the blood of her children to extend what life she has. That is what I learned. It was the only way she kept herself. The only thing that still confounds me is why she left you.” His brow creased as if he could hold the idea against some logic and force it to make sense.

Idonea stared at him. Blood. The word echoed strangely. Her stomach tightened. Everything required pieces of her. As though somewhere along the way she'd learned that her own body was a resource to spend.

“Because of the relic,” Idonea said.

Alcaeus closed his eyes again and patted her hand through the dim. “A ploy. Some foul thing she believed would serve her purposes. I wish I had known, so I could have protected you better.”

Idonea’s lower lip trembled. “I can protect myself,” she said.

He opened his eyes and fixed her with a weary, fierce look. “I think I understand that now. But know this, I had plans. I meant to save you. You are stronger than I was, stronger than Dyota. If anyone can stand to face Nellith, it is you.” His voice hardened into a promise. “I believe that.”

She swallowed, the wordless ache of obligation and longing knotting inside her. “I will find her,” she said. “And the relic. I will find the truth.”

Alcaeus closed his eyes. "Don't try to save me, Idonea."

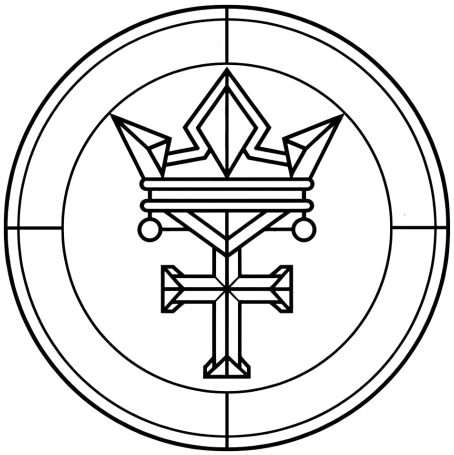
"Why?"

"Because I can't bear it if you die for me. I can't, I can't, I—" His voice broke. He turned his face to the wall.

Idonea knew that he would rather die than let her try.

But if he told the truth about Nellith, then she wouldn’t let him die.

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Chapter 31

Inside the cottage the air was taut with expectation. Lysander had sworn up a storm, while Kitsa had watched in conflict between horror and amazement.

But it was done. Idonea had marked enough of the Lodamante for Current to breathe easy within the confines of the cottage.

Idonea shoved the table aside with a hollow scrape, clearing space in the centre of the room. Her shoulders burned from the effort, but she didn't stop until the floorboards lay bare.

"Why does the Grand Templar leave me be?" she asked, straightening. "Why not keep pressing me?"

Lysander leaned against the wall, the candlelight painting sharp angles across his cheekbones. His arms crossed in that deceptively casual way that meant he was weighing each word before he let it leave his lips.

"He tells me little," he said at last. "Says he is waiting for the daemon to reappear."

Idonea frowned, knowing something didn't add up, but she'd more pressing concerns than the Order machinations.

"But he lets you come into here?"

His lips twitched. "*Let* may be generous."

Kitsa's voice pulled her back. "The circle is ready."

Ash and salt traced the floorboards, looping in a jagged spiral around where the table had been. Candles flickered along its edges, their flames guttering with each draft that slipped beneath the door. The smell of the ash bit at Idonea's nose, mingling with the copper tang of the cuts she'd opened earlier to bleed on the Lodamante.

She lowered herself into the circle, cross-legged. The boards pressed cold against her ankles, the air bristling at the back of her neck, unseen fingers skimming across her skin.

Lysander remained by the wall, but she felt the weight of his gaze. His silence wasn't cold; it pressed on her, steady and deliberate, a reminder that he watched every breath she took.

Kitsa hesitated, then crouched opposite. "Are you sure?" she asked again.

Idonea nodded. "We combine some of my Riven magic with your Resonance."

Kitsa's mouth tightened. "It will hurt."

"I know."

"This isn't what I meant when I said you could reclaim memories. But if it rattles something loose…" Kitsa trailed off, her fingers twitching in her lap. "You must not fight when it begins. Promise me that."

Idonea gave a single nod. Her palms were slick with sweat, though she pressed them against her knees to hide the tremor.

From the closed bedroom door, Lance hissed faintly, restless. She clenched her jaw. The last thing she needed was him interrupting.

Kitsa's eyes darted to Lysander. "If she seizes, hold her steady."

Idonea's gut clenched at the thought, but she didn't speak. She set her gaze on the wavering flame of the nearest candle and tried to steady her breathing.

Kitsa knelt opposite her, laying her fingertips against Idonea's temples.

Idonea jerked at the sudden tearing sensation, her body bowing forward, but strong hands were there in an instant. Lysander's hands pressed down on her shoulders, anchoring her against the pull.

Images split and stuttered across her mind's eye. Colours swam and mixed behind her lids.

A memory pulled her in.

I was crouched down behind the kitchen wall. Dyota tucked in close by my side. Around the corner, Nellith and father's voices floated. Father didn't sound happy.

"You have to let me," Nellith said.

"It could be dangerous," was his reply.

Dyota pulled at the back of my dress. Idonea put her finger to her lips. Dyota grinned and mimicked the motion and kept silent.

"A daemon is loose in the north," Nellith said, "and you worry for me? You know I either do this or put the girls' lives at risk."

"You'll lock us inside," he said, "won't you?"

She scoffed. “Of course. I can’t trust you while I’m gone. The girls must be protected at all costs.”

I raced out behind the corner, Dyota’s surprised gasp following me.

“Take me,” I said.

Nellith smiled down at her. “Maybe in a few years.”

Dyota joined me and bounced up and down. “Me too. Me too.”

The world shifted underneath her.

I was older and stood across from Nellith in the magic room.

“What are the three principles again?” she asked.

“Always have a tether, never panic, and never strike a bargain you can’t uphold,” I said grinning, pleased with myself for remembering.

Nellith nodded. “Good. And why should you fetch one rather than just summoning?”

“Because the bond will be stronger,” I said. Nellith nodded again. “Will I get to try soon?”

“No.” Nellith’s tone was firm.

The memory blurred, splintering. Idonea’s head reeled.

Idonea’s body convulsed in the circle, a raw cry tearing her throat. The memories cut and blurred like shards of broken glass.

Lysander caught her against him, his grip tightening as she gasped for air. “Stay with me.” His voice was the only clear thing.

She slumped forward, chest heaving, her head pillowed against Lysander’s shoulder. His arms were solid around her, too solid. The relief annoyed her immediately.

“That’s enough,” Kitsa said.

Idonea swallowed hard. “Those memories were not from the airship. Those were from when I was a child.”

Kitsa stood, wiping sweat from her brow. “They too were concealed from you.”

Idonea had shared with them what Alcaeus had told her of Nellith, even if she couldn’t fully reconcile it.

Kitsa gave a smile before leaving the cottage. The Templars would surely notice if she stayed too long.

Idonea’s body still trembled. She wanted to collapse, to vanish into the floorboards. But Lysander’s arms were still around her, and when she tried to pull away, his grip only hardened.

“Don’t,” he said.

Her throat closed. “You shouldn’t be this close.”

“Why? Because it scares you?” His voice was threaded with heat.

Her head tilted back instinctively, her eyes meeting his in the flickering candlelight. His face was so near, her pulse stuttered.

She pushed against his chest, weakly. “I’m fine.”

“No,” he said. He shifted, and the movement dragged her cloak loose from her shoulders. She didn’t notice until the cold bit at her skin.

And Lysander froze, his gaze dropping to her back.

Idonea stiffened.

Lysander’s jaw clenched, his eyes locked on the tattoos lining her spine.

“Idonea…” He swallowed. “Why do you have Thaalrun tattooed on you?”

She had thought that was what Nellith had put upon her back when she found that book, but for it to be confirmed stirred something uneasy within her.

Idonea tried to tug the cloak back over herself, but he caught her wrist gently, stopping her.

“Don’t hide it. Do you know what it says?”

She shook her head.

“I think your father might have spoken the truth,” Lysander said.

Her hand went to her back. “What?”

Lysander studied the page for a long moment. His brow drew tight.

"I can give you a translation," he said. "I don't know if I can give you the right one."

"What does that mean?"

"The grammar." He reached out, but didn't touch her back. "Thaalrun doesn't work like our tongues. *Hold fast the key, for you're flame.* It could be an instruction, you, hold the key. Or it could be describing something already happening, the key is being held fast. And *for you're flame*, that could mean *because you're flame*, or it could mean *on behalf of you, who are flame.* I'm not a scholar, witchling. I know the shape of the words. I don't know which shape is the right one."

Idonea's hand drifted to her back without her permission. Her fingers found the lowest mark through her shirt, the one Nellith had carved on her twenty-fifth birthday. It was warm under the fabric. Warmer than her skin had any right to be.

She pulled her hand away.

"What if I am the key."

"Then the relic is something else."

"Or what if I am being held by the key."

Lysander didn't answer at once. He looked at her, at her back, where her hand had been.

"Then I don't know what your mother made you for."

Her breath went thin.

"She knew," Idonea said. "Whatever this is, she knew. The marks. The years. The order."

"Yes."

"And she didn't tell me."

"No."

Her breath halted. *My mother put this on me. She knew.*

The air was too tight. Her hand found the marks. Not tradition, or protection, but preparation.

“I wasn’t meant to save Nellith,” Idonea said, her voice breaking. “I was meant to open the Nexis.”

She let herself lean into him, just enough to feel his breath stir her hair. Then she pulled away.

The space between them filled with what neither dared to say.

Lysander rose, boots creaking against the boards. His shoulders were taut, his eyes still dark with the weight of what he'd seen.

Her eyes strayed to the bedroom door. Lance had fallen quiet.

Lysander’s voice came low, rough. “So, if you go near that relic…”

She cut across him, her own voice sharp. “No. That will not happen. I will not be someone’s tool.”

His jaw tightened. “Then what?”

“We find it. And we destroy it.”

Idonea still believed that the relic was dangerous, and it couldn’t fall into anyone’s hand. But Nellith? Saving her? She wasn’t so sure on that anymore. Not if she was the architect of it all.

But Lysander didn’t move, didn’t speak. His eyes remained on her, fixed and unrelenting.

Her pulse tripped under the weight of his silence. She hated how her body remembered his arm. Hated that it learned the shape of his hands, that

her muscles had yielded when he’d held her down. Steadying her. Anchoring her when the Current tore at her bones.

She should've pulled away sooner.

She told herself she loathed him for what he was. He stood on the wrong side of every line she'd drawn since childhood.

Her skin still burned where he’d touched her. Her body remembered him. That was the problem.

“Witchling.” His voice was softer now.

Her throat closed. She couldn’t meet his eyes. If she did, she feared it would undo her, that she'd let him see how thin her control had become.

When he stepped closer, she didn't move. The stillness was dangerous.

Because if she wanted him, if she needed him, then he'd have power over her. And Idonea had already given too much of herself to forces that claimed they knew what was best for her.

But her heart hammered all the same. She tilted her head back without meaning to, and suddenly his face was there above hers, framed in candlelight, shadow clinging to the hard line of his jaw.

“And if the relic won’t let you?”

She swallowed hard. “I will not be used.”

A flare went through his eyes at that. He lifted a hand, stopped just shy of her cheek. His fingers trembled before curling into a fist, knuckles ghosting near her skin, but not daring to touch.

“Everything about you is dangerous,” he murmured.

Her pulse hammered. “Then why are you still here?”

He bent his head just enough that his forehead met hers.

Nails biting into her palms, she pulled her chin back an inch. *Do not yield*, she told herself. *Not to him*.

“Because leaving you,” Lysander said, voice rough, “would be worse.”

Neither of them moved.

Then she stepped back, putting air between them because if she didn't, she might not stop at all. Torn between the instinct to bare her teeth and the dangerous, aching urge to lean into the warmth he offered without asking.

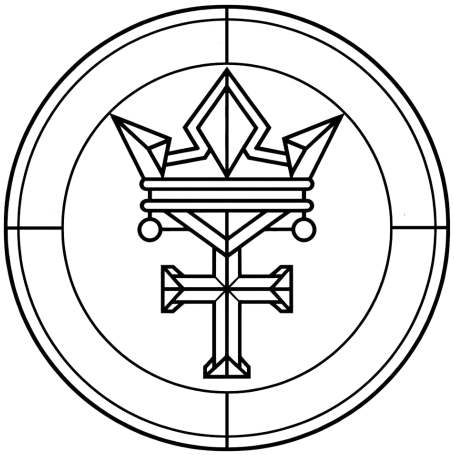
Her voice was steady when it returned. “Then believe me. We find this relic, we destroy it.”

His lips parted, but whatever he might have said, he swallowed it down. Instead, he gave a single curt nod.

But his eyes lingered on her mouth far too long before he turned away.

Harsh knocks at the door broke through Idonea’s thoughts.
“Brother Lysander, bring the prisoner out.”
The Grand Templar had come for her.

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Chapter 32

The knocks at the door hadn’t even faded before another sound drowned them out.

A deep, mechanical thrum. The roof rattled, and dust sifted down from the beams.

The command repeated. “Brother Lysander. The prisoner.”

But Lysander didn’t move. His gaze shifted to the window, his whole body tightening.

Idonea hadn’t told him about the bee. A cacophony of shouts went up beyond the door. Steel rang against stone.

Relief and fear mingled. Safira had come; the pirates were there.

Idonea’s fingers brushed the hilt of her dagger.

The Templars forced their way into the cottage. Snow swept in with them, along with the chaos from the square beyond.

The Grand Templar crowded into the doorway. Lysander took a step in front of Idonea. She pricked a finger open on her blade.

Idonea spied the silhouette of the Clockwork Crows’ airship in the sky. The ship hovered like a predator over the town, ropes dangling to the ground. Through the open door came the scent of powder-smoke and burning oil. The pirates were here in force, but the Templars pressed them at every turn.

The Grand Templar lifted his gauntleted hand. "Step aside."

Lysander didn't move.

"Lysander."

Still nothing.

"*Brother.*" The Grand Templar's voice sharpened. "I am ordering you. By the oath you swore at sixteen."

"I remember the oath."

"Then move."

"No." Lysander’s jaw tightened, but he didn't move. His blade was half-drawn, the steel whispering like an unspoken threat. The word echoed in her head.

A murmur rippled among the Templars behind him. They had expected hesitation, not defiance. Current stirred at her call.

Safira’s voice carried from beyond the square: “Crows! Make the bastards bleed!”

Then came the thunder of pistols, the shriek of grappling hooks thrown against stone, the groan of wood under strain as the airship pulled tighter against the town.

The Grand Templar’s eyes narrowed. “Traitor. You’d throw away your oath for a witch?”

Lysander’s shoulders straightened. “She serves the Light too.”

Gasps flared among the Templars. The Grand Templar’s face darkened, fury breaking through his calm.

“Seize them.”

The cottage came apart around them.

Two Templars came through the door first. Lysander took the lead one before the man had cleared the threshold; Idonea didn't see the strike, only the falling. The second was already swinging for her when something black moved past her shoulder and the swinging stopped. Lance, withdrawing, his scales wet to the elbow of his wing. The Templar folded around the hole in his chest in surprise, as if the wound had been a question he hadn't expected.

The Grand Templar stood in the doorway and watched both deaths without moving.

Above them the roof gave. A grappling claw came through the rafters and took half the roof with it on its way down. Snow and splinters and the smell of pitch. Safira swung down on the rope before the debris had settled, landed in the wreckage of the rafters, and put her pistol against the Grand Templar's helm without breaking stride.

"Thought you'd start without me?"

The Grand Templar didn't look at her. He was still looking at Idonea.

"Out," Idonea said. "The square. Too tight in here."

She didn't trust her magic in the cottage. Not with the Lodamante she'd carved still half-singing in the walls, not with Lysander already bleeding from somewhere she hadn't seen yet. Pirates were pouring down from the

broken roof now in a steady black rain. The Templars in the doorway gave ground because they had no other choice, and the fight moved into the square.

She came out behind it and the square was already a different place than the one she'd crossed an hour ago.

The Crows had brought the ship down low enough that its shadow swallowed the fountain. Ropes hung from her belly like the legs of an enormous insect. Pirates went up and down them carrying powder kegs, ropes, bound men. Safira was already in the middle of it, shouting in the brisk cheerful voice of a woman whose week had been improved by violence.

"Strip their steel! No teeth left to bite with!"

Behind Idonea, the terraced houses where the witches were sealed in shook with fists. She heard her name, muffled, from somewhere in the second one — Kitsa, she thought, but didn't let herself turn. The Templars first. The witches were behind iron and they would stay there until there was something to come out to.

A mace came at her ear. Her hand was up before she'd seen it. The claws had been waiting, eager, since the cottage; she caught the mace on the downswing and let the Current spool around her fingers, and the metal went hot, and then it went apart. The Templar holding it stared at his empty grip for the half-second it took for one of Safira's crew to put a pistol against his temple.

Across the square, Lysander and the Grand Templar had found each other.

She knew the sound of Lysander's sword the way she knew the sound of her own breathing now. It was the sound that was wrong. Each strike was landing harder than it should and rebounding further than it should, and she understood watching them that Marcin was not just bigger than Lysander. He was the same as Lysander, only further along. Whatever the Eitr made of a body, the Grand Templar had been making of his for decades.

A Templar came at her from the side. She put a wall of Current up between them and it dragged her sideways with the strain. She hadn't slept. She hadn't eaten. A pirate caught the Templar's temple with the butt of his pistol before she'd to think about it.

The Templars were *organising*. She saw it in the same moment Safira did, the loose knot at the centre of the square tightening into a formation,

the ones with maces still in hand falling back into a wedge, and the pirates getting cocky, getting close, getting cut for it.

"Hold them," Idonea said, more to herself than to anyone. Then louder: "Hold them. I'm going to move the ground."

Safira moved instantly, asking no questions.

Idonea opened her palm again and put her free hand flat against the cobbles. The Current went into the stone. The square buckled in a slow ring around the Templars, not enough to throw them, enough to take their footing, enough to push them inward. They stumbled into each other. The wedge collapsed back into a knot.

"Crows! Net them!"

The nets came from somewhere. Hooks bit into pauldrons. Chains went around throats. The Templars bellowed and their maces rang against the chain and their maces did nothing, and every time one of them tried to push out of the press Idonea cracked the cobbles again and they stumbled back in.

All of them except one.

The Grand Templar was carving a path through the chain as though it were rope, and the pirates who came at him went down without slowing him. He took a man's arm off at the elbow with one stroke. The next pirate he simply stepped on. His cleaver came back up clean.

Lysander went in again.

The Grand Templar caught Lysander's sword with his gauntlet, and the impact threw Lysander into the half-collapsed wall behind him hard enough that the stone gave. Idonea was running before she'd decided to run. Lysander pushed off the wall before she reached him. His mechanical arm was wrong. She saw it from twenty paces. The shoulder hung lower than the other, sparks at the elbow, the hand opening and closing in spasms.

He didn't look at her. He raised the sword again.

Something in her chest broke open at the sight of him refusing to fall.

"*Enough.*"

She stopped trying to hold back the Current. Every weapon in the square went red in its bearer's hand. Templars cursed and dropped them. Steel hissed in the snow. The pirates surged in to take what was being dropped, and chain went around shoulders, and within thirty seconds there was only one Templar still standing.

He turned to look at her, and the look was a hammer.

"*You*."

He came at her.

Lysander cut across him before he'd taken three steps. The cleaver met Lysander's blade and went through it into the mechanical arm, into the joint where the brass met the flesh, into the gears. The arm seized and sparked. A sound from Lysander that wasn't quite a cry. He stayed on his feet. He didn't let go of the sword.

The Grand Templar staggered.

Idonea was already throwing what was left of her Current up out of the cobbles. Chains of it came up around his arms mid-swing. He pulled against them. The strain went through her wrists, and she leaned into it and pulled back, and he came down to one knee, and the cleaver came out of his hand.

She didn't kill him. Alcaeus wouldn't have liked that. There was enough Templar blood in the snow already, and besides, she wanted to know what Marcin would say, when he'd no choice but to say it.

The square went quiet by degrees.

The other Templars knelt where the chains held them, breath fogging in the cold. The pirates were doing the practical work of disarming, binding, gagging, with the easy competence of people who'd done it before. Somewhere on the ship's deck someone was laughing. Safira walked across the square towards Marcin, her boots crunching, her pistol holstered.

Marcin lifted his head. His face was bloodied. He looked composed in the way of a man who'd decided what story he was going to tell about this, later. He didn't look at Idonea, or at Safira. He looked at Lysander.

"How long have you been able to feel the Nexis?"

Lysander didn't answer.

"Three months. Six." Marcin's voice was conversational. "I knew the moment you came back from the last errand. I have been waiting for it to finish." He smiled. The smile was small and almost kind. "I am sorry, brother. I would've made it quick."

Idonea looked between them. Marcin had known what Lysander was becoming, known what it'd cost him, and still he waited. Lysander would've chosen a person. Marcin had chosen an outcome.

Lysander's good hand tightened on the sword's grip. He didn't strike.

Safira stood tall over them, pistol aimed squarely at his head. “Looks like we won.”

Idonea turned from him, chest heaving, and staggered towards the terraced houses. The pounding of fists still echoed faintly. She pressed her bloodied hand against the first iron lock. Current pulsed outward, searing the metal. The lock split with a sharp crack, and the door swung open.

Kitsa raced out, Idonea staggering under the force of her embrace.

“Thank you,” Kitsa said and released her.

The witches took in the surrounding carnage. None of them looked frightened, and that surprised her. Lance perched himself atop the fountain’s shattered statue. Idonea noted his bloodied wings, and knew he'd done his own fair share of damage.

Safira’s eyes narrowed between Idonea and the other witches.

“Well, doll?” the pirate captain asked.

“These witches will no longer be safe in the Republic,” Idonea said, and took a deep breath.

Lysander walked up to her side, his right arm bleeding from a wound.

Kitsa’s eyes widened. “Let us help heal you.” She glanced over at some of the other witches.

Idonea nodded. “That would be most welcome.”

Lysander looked at the void where his left arm used to be, now not even a mechanical one there. The empty space where the arm should've been made her stomach turn.

She reached out and touched his shoulder. “You can always make a new one.”

Safira was calling orders to her pirates. “Gag the loud ones. If they twitch, break a finger.”

Kitsa’s eyes widened and pressed both palms to Lysander’s bleeding bicep. “Hold still,” she said.

Kitsa closed her eyes. The bleeding eased, then stilled. The torn muscle twitched under her hands, and Lysander’s jaw clenched.

He glanced at his left shoulder.

From the fountain ring came a muffled grunt; one of the younger Templars testing the chain. Kerem obliged him with the back of a pistol. The noise cut off.

Once Kitsa was done, Idonea smiled at her. “A favour. Please go check on Alcaeus. Assure him all is well.”

Kitsa nodded and ran off.

Safira strolled back over to Idonea. “Now what?”

Idonea looked towards the Templars, swallowing. “Haul them into one of these houses. We lock them up there.”

Safira whistled to her crew. “In there. All of them.”

Pirates moved at once. The kneeling Templars were hauled to their feet in pairs and marched, stumbling, across the snow. One Templar tried to buck Kerem off his shoulder; a pirate behind him simply kicked the back of his knee and he crumpled with a grunt.

“Strip ‘em,” Safira called. “Leave nothing but the clothes.”

“Keep them breathing,” Idonea said. “Every one of them goes in alive.”

“And stays in,” Safira added. “And gags.”

Kerem tore a linen sheet into bands and knotted a dozen.

Safira stood over the kneeling Grand Templar. The other Templars had been hauled into the terrace house already; he was the last. Her pistol was holstered, she'd not drawn it for him.

"Look at me," she said.

He did, but there was no recognition in his face.

"Two years ago you boarded a vessel in the Zorya passage. The *Crescent Wren*. You hanged her crew from her own rigging. Eleven of them. They were carrying witches you had marked for the College, and the captain had refused to give them up."

She crouched, so they were eye to eye.

"I am not going to kill you," she said. "I considered it. I have been considering it for two years. I want you to know I could have. I want you to carry that for the rest of whatever life you have left. Eleven names, Grand Templar. I am going to send them to you in letters, one a year, on the anniversary of the hanging. The first will arrive at the Temple before midwinter. You will not know which of your readers gave it to you. You will only know it has arrived."

She stood. "Walk him in."

Two of her crew hauled Marcin to his feet. He didn't speak and didn’t fight the cloth when it came; he held Idonea’s stare instead, and she made herself not look away as the band lay white against his jaw.

“Make sure there is no fire,” Idonea said. “But get them blankets.”

A few witches helped the pirates.

The pirates found an ironwood hatstand and wedged it through a pair of door handles to form a bar; chain slung around that and padlocked it.

Someone fetched iron nails. They hammered the windows closed from the outside.

Safira prowled the perimeter once more, eyes hawkish. “That should hold some days.”

“Keys?” Kerem asked.

Safira twirled them on one finger and threw them into the snow.

Idonea pressed her bloodied palm against the door. A quiet smear of Current that would prickle her skin if anyone forced the lock from within.

They weren’t leaving yet. Not quite. The airship hung lower again, ballast grumbling, but the Crows worked at deck level now.

Safira clapped Idonea on the shoulder. “Get some rest. We can watch.”

“You don’t have to leave?”

The captain shook her head. “I’ve got injured. The Republic won’t send a ship after us too quickly.”

“Thank you,” Idonea said.

Safira gave a nod. “Rest, doll.”

Idonea touched Lysander on the arm as she walked by and paused at the ruined cottage. She wouldn’t be sleeping there.

Lysander pointed to Alcaeus’ house. She nodded, and Lysander moved first, his stride slow. She fell into step beside him, close enough that if he faltered, she could brace him. Lance skittered overhead, his wings folded tight, keeping low like a shadow unwilling to drift too far.

The square behind them remained alive with motion. Pirates patched wounds and carried the injured towards makeshift pallets beneath the airship’s ropes.

Lysander dropped heavily onto the bench by the wall; his good hand braced on his thigh.

Idonea crouched in front of him, her palm still slick with blood. “Let me see.”

She peeled away his clothes, exposing the remnants of his mechanical arm still attached below his shoulder. She detached them carefully.

A long bruise already blossomed across his ribs where the Grand Templar’s blow had thrown him.

“You shouldn’t have stood in his way,” she said.

“You shouldn’t have either.”

Her throat tightened. She turned from him long enough to fetch water from the hearth bucket, soaking a strip of cloth to wipe the grime from his

skin. He didn’t flinch at her touch, though his eyes never left her face.

Lysander spoke again, his voice quieter. “What of them?”

“The Templars?”

He nodded.

“They’ll live,” Idonea said.

Idonea set the cloth aside and leaned back against the opposite wall, exhaustion pulling at her bones.

“And you?” she asked.

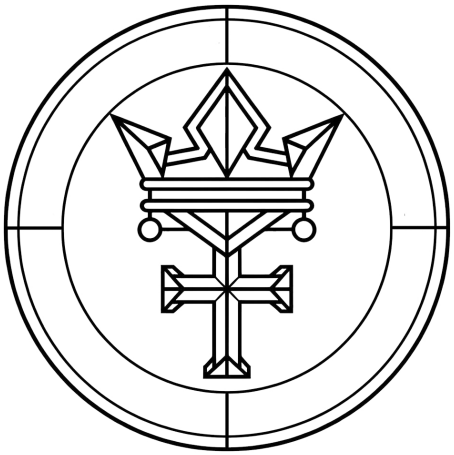
Lysander leaned his head back, eyes half-closed. “I imagine exiled from the Order.”

“I’m sorry.”

He shrugged. “I’ve made my choice, witchling.”

The words should've comforted her. Instead, they sat heavy in her chest. Choices had costs. She knew that better than most.

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Chapter 33

Idonea had barely slept. Rest fled from her, leaving only the raw ache of exhaustion.

When she rose, snow still drifted over the square, softening the bloodstains into rust-red blossoms. The house where the captured Templars were confined stood silent, its barred windows already rimmed in frost.

The airship hung low in the square, ropes swaying against the broken roofs. Pirates clambered along her rigging, hauling crates, while the witches huddled near the chapel.

Lysander hadn't emerged from Alcaeus' house. His mechanical arm lay broken beyond quick repair, and though he'd not spoken of it, Idonea knew the weight of that loss pressed heavier on him than he would admit. She left him to his silence for now, turning her steps towards the hospice.

The door creaked as she neared, and Kitsa stepped out. She smiled at the sight of Idonea.

"How is he?" Idonea asked.

Kitsa glanced back from where she'd just come. "Hanging in. But he cannot last much longer."

Idonea swallowed. "I know."

"Then?" Kitsa pressed.

"Because I must see the relic destroyed," Idonea said. "He understands."

Kitsa sighed. "So, what happens now?"

Idonea's eyes narrowed. "I think you can help."

She took Kitsa back to the fountain. But Kitsa's words about Alcaeus sat with her the entire way. With the Templars no longer in power, Idonea didn't have to hide her magic. The fountain was the central point of the town.

Idonea knelt by the fountain’s edge, her hand curled over the cold stone lip.

“What are we doing?” Kitsa asked, kneeling beside her.

“Help me guide Resonance to locate the daemon,” Idonea said.

“Oh…” Kitsa trailed off.

Idonea caught the uncertainty in her tone and offered a smile. “It will be okay. It won’t draw him to us. We only need to see.”

She closed her eyes and drew a deep breath, steadying herself.

Kitsa rested her hand on Idonea’s back. “Remember, breathe. Connect.”

Idonea found the soft, thrumming rhythm that hummed like a heartbeat. Then she nicked her finger on her dagger, letting the Riven magic connect to the thrum.

Her body tensed at the connection. Kitsa’s touch grounding her.

The stone beneath her blurred and then vanished. She saw beneath: roots of Current spiralling deep into the bedrock, a Current held fast, not scattered but contained, and not natural.

Her breath hitched. A pulse of power radiated from below the town square, sharp as a spear-tip. It was buried beneath the chapel.

She opened her eyes, chest heaving. Relief hit first, then dread. “He’s there.”

“Where?” Kitsa said.

Idonea had attracted a crowd of pirates and witches. “Beneath the chapel.”

Safira huffed a laugh. “Can’t help but bury secrets under the pulpit.”

Idonea pushed herself upright, still unsteady from the strain of channelling both Currents. She braced herself on the fountain and met the pirate captain’s eyes. “Are you ready to leave?”

“Almost.” Safira’s gaze flicked to the witches huddled nearby, then back.

Idonea followed her look, her heart clenching. She turned to Safira again. “I need one last favour.”

The captain arched a brow. “Another one? Doll, you’re running up quite the ledger.”

“Take her,” Idonea said, nodding to Kitsa. “Take all of them. They can’t stay here.”

Kitsa’s face paled. “Idonea—”

“You’ll be safe with the Crows,” Idonea pressed. Her voice carried, firm enough for all the witches to hear. “And you’ll be useful. Safira needs a witch who can anchor storms and heal cuts.”

Safira grinned, sharp-toothed. “I do like the sound of that.” She studied Kitsa for a long beat, then gave a single nod. “Fine. I’ll take her. And the others. But I’ll keep one, your friend, and drop the rest somewhere safe.”

Relief loosened the coil in Idonea’s chest. She clasped the pirate’s forearm. “Thank you.”

“Don’t thank me yet,” Safira muttered, though her eyes glinted with satisfaction.

Kerem came up beside them, carrying a mechanical arm. “For the Templar.”

Idonea raised her brows. “You had one?”

He shrugged. "We had three in the hold. Seemed wasteful."

Safira smiled. “You’d be surprised at what we have.”

Idonea took it. “Thank you.”

“It isn’t fancy,” Kerem said, “but it should work.” He turned away, calling orders to the crew.

The witches murmured uneasily when Safira barked the order for boarding. Ropes unfurled from the airship, nets lowered to carry supplies. Pirates guided the witches one by one, helping the frailest into slings to be hauled gently up. Others climbed, their bare feet gripping the lines, determination written on their tired faces.

Lidiya didn't move towards the ropes. Idonea found her at the chapel wall, her shawl drawn tight, her hands folded in her sleeves.

"You should go."

"No, child."

"Lidiya. The Order will look for someone to blame. They will find you because you're still here."

"Then they will find me." The older woman's mouth turned at one corner. "There are buried witches here. I am not leaving them with no one. Someone has to stay where the names are. Besides, I will watch over your father."

"If you're sure."

"Yes." Lidiya looked towards the airship and the climbing witches and the pale glint of pirate steel.

Idonea swallowed, for she didn't have an argument against this. There was nothing she could offer the older woman that the older woman didn't already have a measured answer for.

"I will come back to you. Before I leave the village."

Lidiya nodded once. "I know."

One of the older girls, seventeen, maybe, paused at the rope. "If I go on this ship, I won't have to go to the fields?"

"No," Idonea said.

The girl looked at her for a long moment, as if trying to decide whether to believe her, then she climbed.

Idonea then stood with Kitsa at the base of the rope. The younger woman’s hands trembled, though her jaw was set.

“I can help you,” Kitsa said.

“You already have,” Idonea said. “But the Republic is no place for a witch.”

Kitsa nodded. Then, without another word, she seized the rope and climbed.

For a moment Idonea almost called her back. She didn't. Kitsa was finally heading towards a future. Idonea refused to make herself another thing that kept her here.

Kitsa's slight frame moved with stubborn strength, higher and higher until she vanished over the airship’s railing. One by one, the other witches followed. For the first time in living memory, none of them were going to the fields. Pirates lashed down the last of their salvaged gear and pulled the ropes taut.

Safira whistled sharp between her teeth. “Cast off!”

With a groan of timber and rope, the Clockwork Crows’ airship rose, shedding snow from its deck like feathers. Idonea tilted her face upward, watching until the shadows of the witches disappeared into the sky. She'd spent a great deal of her life standing still while other people vanished into the distance.

A sharp cold descended over the square as the ship pulled away, bringing a heavy silence. The witches had futures waiting for them now. Her eyes drifted to the chapel. She drew her cloak tighter and turned towards Alcaeus’ house. The snow crunched beneath her boots, the sound sharp in the stillness.

The door creaked when she pushed it open. Lysander sat near the hearth, his broken arm laid across his lap. He had stripped away the mangled plating, leaving exposed gears and fractured rods jutting out at crooked angles. He was working one-handed, trying to pry a bent cog loose with a knife.

He looked up as she entered. Exhaustion carved lines deep into his brow, but his eyes sharpened when they met hers. “They left?”

She nodded. “And left you a gift.” She held out the new arm.

He nodded to the table nearby, and she laid it down.

“I found him,” Idonea said, her voice steady though her pulse still raced.

Lysander set the knife aside. “Where?”

She stepped closer, lowering herself into the chair opposite him. “Beneath the chapel.”

He exhaled, leaning back, the chair creaking beneath his weight. “The one place they never let you near.”

Idonea rubbed her palms against her thighs. “I sent the witches away with the pirates. They’ll be safe, from Templars … and daemons.”

Lysander’s expression hardened again, but his eyes never left hers. “And what about you?”

“I can’t leave,” she said. “Not until it’s done.”

“Then neither can I.”

The words landed heavily. She knew what they'd cost him. Her throat tightened. She held his gaze, letting the silence stretch.

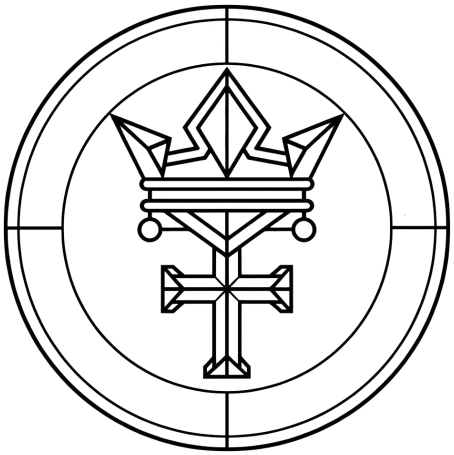
“When?” Lysander asked.

Idonea sighed. “Soon. There is something I must do first.”

He shifted in the chair. “I might go down to the basement.” He held up the ruined arm and new. “See what can be done.”

She nodded, and watched the hatch close behind him.

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Chapter 34

It was her only way.

The airship was long gone, and everyone had left.

If she failed, there would be no second chance. The world would be left vulnerable to the thing sleeping beneath the chapel.

The Templars wouldn’t be held in that terrace house for long.

Idonea paced at the edge of the fjord, boots crunching through the crust of snow, the black water shifting restlessly against the frozen banks. She had chosen this place deliberately, away from prying eyes, away from Lysander. If she fell here, it wouldn't be in front of him.

The thought spurred her to work.

Lance curled beside her boots, wings folded tight, his serpentine body coiled, sensing the strain inside her. She lowered one finger, stroking along his scaled neck. His eyelids slitted open, and he released a long, drawn-out hiss. It was softer than most.

Idonea couldn't share their certainty. Her chest was tight, her mouth dry. She was about to unmake herself. Risk possession, risk worse, by entering the Nexis without anchor or guard. There was, by every measure, a one-in-three chance she would come back whole. And she’d not told Lysander that. To her, the odds seemed generous.

The knife gleamed in her hand. She pressed its edge to her finger and dragged it, not wincing, letting the sting root her body in the mortal world. Her blood welled, hot and dark against the snow. She drew the circle, crimson lines glinting in the moonlight, closing herself in.

She lowered herself cross-legged into its heart. The snow soaked through her skirts immediately, biting cold into her thighs, but she held still. Her breath came shallow, her heartbeat thundering too loudly in her ears.

She poured the grave dirt next, scattering it across the lines where blood and snow met. The smell was faint, metallic and sour, and it caught in

the back of her throat. Her tongue darted out, licking cracked lips.

“Hold fast.” She shut her eyes.

Lance stirred uneasily, wings twitching, and released a low, warning hiss.

Current rose around her, and she shaped it with thought, with will, with desperation.

Her lungs constricted. Vapour curled around her, mist thickening until the night itself was smothering. It tasted of iron and smoke, acrid and burning. Orange tendrils coiled like dusk-fire, crawling up her nostrils, down her throat. She forced herself not to choke, not to fight. She had to let it in. She had to let it take.

Her eyes snapped open, and the world was gone.

She stood upon cracked earth that bled heat, each fissure glowed with molten light. No sky hung above her, only a roiling void of endless black. The air seared her skin, beads of sweat forming instantly along her temples, throat, and arms. Already, she longed for the sting of snow.

The Nexis.

Her pulse quickened, part terror, part awe. She had crossed. The realisation landed a heartbeat later. There was no guarantee she'd cross back.

But the plane was empty. Too empty, the silence was worse than any roar. Then they crawled out of the cracks, and she stood her ground and waited.

She turned, her boots scraping across brittle stone. The void pulsed in response to her movement, and her stomach knotted. Eyes, not one pair, dozens, hundreds, watching.

The first claw broke the surface. Then another.

Scaled limbs, hooked talons, thick ridged hides heaved themselves from the cracks in the ground. They emerged in silence, only the scratch of claw on stone, their eyes glowing faint amber. Reptilian daemons, each different, each monstrous, each too close. Their breath washed hot against her skin, smelling of ash and rot.

Idonea stood perfectly still, heart hammering, forcing her hands not to tremble. Hundreds of eyes watched her, and none blinked at the same time. If she showed fear, if she moved wrong, she would become prey.

They encircled her, shoulders and horns and wings blotting out the wasteland. The closest leaned in enough that she saw the flick of a forked

tongue between its fangs. Its breath smelled wrong.

And then, darting between their hulking frames, came what she sought.

It slipped free of the crowd with jerking, angular movements, its leathery skin pale against the scaled hides around it. Its ears flopped, tusks crooked out of its lower jaw, and its ribs jutted sharp beneath taut skin. Its claws flexed, its horns catching obscure light.

Idonea’s lips curved despite herself. She had found her guide.

“Imp,” she said aloud, her voice steady though her throat burned.

It froze, eyes too large in its gaunt face, and then turned its head towards her.

“I wish for you to accompany me back up,” she said, sweat streaking her temples. “There is something I would've you do. A reward, of course.”

It scuttled towards her, low and quick, until it stood at her hip. Its grin stretched wide.

“Would you do this for me?” she asked, her voice soft but firm.

“Agreed,” the imp rasped. Its voice was smoke and gravel. “This lot has bored me enough.”

She blinked. No haggling. No bartering. No test. That was too easy. Nothing in her experience had ever been easy.

“You wouldn’t ask the price?” she said.

Its shrug was grotesque, boneless. “Go now with me. Or leave.”

She glanced at the circle of daemons closing tighter around them, their breaths burning her cheeks. There was no time to linger. No witch could walk out of the daemon plane alone.

“Very well.”

“Wonderful.” Its grin split wider, and it extended a clawed hand.

Her stomach turned. To touch a daemon was to invite corruption, but she'd no choice. She pressed her palm to its, before her courage shattered.

The world ripped.

Her body spun, her skull splitting with pressure, blood blooming hot from her nose. She choked on a cry as the wasteland dissolved.

Snow bit her skin again. Her vision doubled. The fjord tilted. For a moment she wasn't sure which world she stood in.

Her knees hit the ground, palms raw against the ice. A faint ache throbbed at the base of her skull, a promise of what price she might yet pay.

The imp stood beside her, solid in the snow, its grin sharper than before.

Lance shot upward with a hiss, wings flaring. He spiralled above the daemon, hissing and spitting.

“Do not harm the Iaculus,” Idonea said to the imp.

The imp’s head was cocked to one side, clearly interested in Lance. Its ears twitched at every hiss.

“The task for you, imp,” Idonea said.

The imp flashed her a wicked grin. “Balmo. But first, the reward?”

She licked her lips. “You’ll be free once we are. I will not banish you. You can also have a single Iaculus scale.” She was only glad Lance hadn’t noticed her taking one earlier.

Balmo’s grin sharpened. “Fair.” His tusks gleamed. “What is task?”

“There is a daemon, and a relic, deep below,” she said. “I’d have a guide. To save my magic.”

Balmo nodded once. Then, without warning, he leapt and swatted at Lance.

The Iaculus shrieked, wings snapping wide, and the two creatures spiralled into a vicious tangle.

Idonea staggered back, shock locking her throat. Claws flashed, wings beat, their snarls and hisses tearing through the still night. They crashed into trees, rolled across the snow, each too quick, too feral to separate.

“Stop!” Neither obeyed.

She pricked her finger, gathered Current towards her, pulling it into her palms. They both twitched in response to the Current movement, but didn't cease. With a crack, she slammed her hands together. Thunder tore the air, rippling outward in a wave.

Both creatures froze mid-lunge, rendered still by the backlash of power. Lance circled upward, hissing his fury, retreating into the night sky. Balmo dropped lightly back to her side, unbothered, eyes glinting.

Idonea’s breath heaved, her palms aching. She glared at them both, though her pulse raced still from the surge. “Enough. Both of you.”

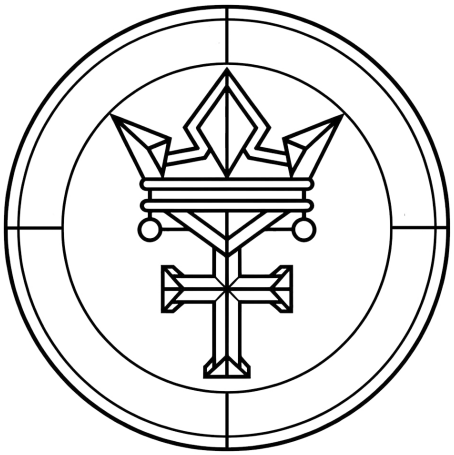
Balmo cocked its head again, grin returning. Lance’s cry echoed high above, distant but watchful.

“Wait within the chapel,” Idonea said to the imp.

Balmo gave a short nod and loped off towards the town, its silhouette horrifying against the snow.

Alone again, Idonea pressed trembling fingers against her lips. Her blood still marked the snow.

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Chapter 35

Idonea sat on the edge of Lysander's bed in Alcaeus's house. Her cloak hung off one shoulder. The cut on her wrist had dried into a brown crust she would have to soak off later.

Her hands kept shaking. She put one on her knee and pressed down. The other was no better.

Balmo would lead her under the chapel in the morning. The summoning sat behind her eyes as a slow pressure that came and went with her pulse. She would carry it for days. She would carry it whether she walked out of the chapel or didn't.

She rose. The floor creaked. She crossed to the door.

Lysander was against the outside wall, shoulder braced, breath ghosting white. He turned his head when she opened the door. The lamplight caught his eyes, and something in his face moved that she'd never seen before. It moved and was gone.

"You should be resting."

"Don't."

"Don't what?"

"Don't do the concerned thing. I can't — not right now, Lysander, I can't have you being kind to me right now."

He looked at her for a long moment. "All right."

"I didn't mean—"

"I know what you meant. You went further than you should have. I felt the veil shake. From here."

She hadn't wanted him to know. "It was necessary."

"Was it." He said it without the lift of a question. "Or are you throwing yourself at the fire until you burn."

She stepped outside, the door clicking shut behind her. Snow squeaked under her boots.

"Lysander."

He looked at her, and she had no defence against it.

"I don't know if I am going to survive what is coming."

His shoulder came off the wall. "Don't say that."

"It's true. The relic. The daemon. The Nexis. Vinea has been waiting for me before I was born. I might be enough. I might not be."

His hand came up. It stopped halfway between them, then went back to his side.

She watched the hand he'd not given her. She wanted it more than she'd wanted anything in months. That thought should've sent her running; instead, she stepped closer.

"I have been trying," he said, "not to say a thing to you for days."

"What thing?"

"You know what thing."

The cold was in her lungs, and her ribs, and behind her eyes. Lance sat on the eaves above the door, motionless except for the very tip of his tail, which moved once and stilled.

"Say it now," she said. "Before tomorrow."

He looked at her another count. Then he closed the space he'd been holding open since the basement, and his mouth was on hers, and the cold didn't matter anymore.

The first kiss was not careful. There was no time in it for careful. His hand came up at last and cupped her jaw, his thumb at the corner of her mouth, and the metal one closed at her waist and held her against him with a steadiness her own body didn't have. She made a sound against his mouth that was almost a laugh and almost not.

His arm came around her waist and tightened, and an unfamiliar sound broke against her mouth. He lifted her. Her boots left the snow. The door banged shut behind them.

Inside, the lamp burned low.

He pressed her back against the wall just inside the door. The wood was cold through her clothes. His mouth moved along her jaw and down to her throat, and a shiver ran through her that had nothing to do with the cold. Her hands gripped his shoulders. She tilted her head to give him more of her throat. Her body had been waiting for this since the basement. Since the kiss he tore himself away from. Since longer than either of them would admit.

"You scare—" She stopped. "No. You terrify me."

"Good."

"That wasn't a compliment, Lysander."

"I know."

His hand slid down to her cloak's clasp. He undid it without looking. The wool dropped to the floor.

She caught his face in both her hands and brought his mouth back to hers. Her glasses pressed crookedly into the bridge of her nose. She didn't push them straight.

He pulled back. His hand came up and slid her glasses off her face. He folded them once, carefully, the way she folded them. He set them on the bedside table without looking, the corner, near the lamp, the exact place she'd set them down last night.

"Lysander."

"Mm."

"How long have you been watching me put those down?"

A quick breath against her temple. "Long enough."

Her chest did something she'd not asked it to do.

He was not in a hurry now. The first kiss outside had been because there was no time. This one was unhurried because there was. His hand at her waist, the mechanical one, was steady against her back. His hand paused at her hip, as though confirming she was still there.

"You're — I don't know what you are, Idonea."

"Neither do I."

"Good."

He laughed softly against her mouth. He hadn't laughed for weeks. The sound went through her ribs like something physical.

He walked her backward towards the bed. She let him. His boot caught the chair leg, and he laughed again, quieter, into her hair. They sat down on the edge of the mattress together.

Her hands went to his belt, the sudden coolness of leather under her fingers catching her by surprise. Her hands were steadier than the rest of her, which surprised her. The rest of her had gone very quiet.

He stopped her with his hand over hers. "Wait."

She looked at him.

"Idonea." His voice had gone rough. "If we do this. I will not want to undo it. I will want nothing else."

Her heart squeezed painfully. "Neither will I."

His hand left hers, and he was kissing her again, and she stopped thinking.

No one had touched her since Jovana.

The bed, she'd told herself, had stopped interesting her. Her body had gone elsewhere. None of it was true. She had been waiting for hands that didn't arrive as an interruption.

Jovana's stars on her collarbones. Jovana saying *the world will give you another*, the cruellest thing Jovana had ever said to her and the truest.

For the first time, she let herself believe it.

She got his shirt up. He helped her. The mechanical arm caught the sleeve in a way the flesh arm wouldn't have, and he flinched, slight, almost hidden, the flinch he'd learned to put away before anyone saw it. He laid the shirt aside. His mouth came back to hers.

She didn't let him pass it over.

Her hand went to the seam at his shoulder, where the brass met him.

He stilled under her palm. "Don't."

"Why?"

He didn't have an answer ready. She waited.

"Lysander."

"It is not —" He stopped. "No one touches it."

"I understand."

"You don't have to —"

"I know what mine looks like." She kept her hand where it was. The skin there was thicker than the rest of him, ridged where the surgeons of the Order had grafted brass into bone. "Show me yours."

After a moment his forehead came down against her shoulder. He let her look.

She traced the seam with one finger. He breathed in once, sharply, then steadied. She didn't rush. She held still. Her mouth touched the place where the brass entered him, and she held it there.

"Idonea."

"Yes."

"You don't have to —"

"Lysander. I want to." She traced the brass again. Memorising.

His hand came up and tangled in her hair, and held her there a moment longer than she'd meant to stay, as if he couldn't yet let her stop.

When she lifted her head, his eyes were closed.

She turned in his arms and pulled him down on top of her.

His mouth came back to hers, and she made a helpless sound, and he answered it with his own.

His two hands were different. She hadn't understood, until now, how much he'd been telling her with that difference.

His hand was warm at her ribs, his thumb stroking the soft skin beneath her breast. The metal one settled at her hip, holding her down against the mattress where his hand was moving. She understood without being told. He used the metal to brace her and the flesh to know her. Every place he wanted to feel her, he reached for with his hand.

Then his hand found the ink along her spine and stilled.

He didn't ask. He didn't have to. The question sat in his caught breath. In the way his fingers traced the lowest mark, then the next, then the next, learning the order Nellith had drawn them in.

He lowered his head and pressed his open mouth to the small of her back, to the youngest mark, still tender beneath his lips.

Something inside her broke.

The mouth he set against the ink her mother had carved into her year after year undid her in a way no touch ever had. Her eyes burned. Her throat closed around a sound—relief and hunger and recognition braided into one—she'd no name for. She didn't cry. Neither could she breathe.

He stilled against her skin. His breath caught.

"Idonea."

"Mm."

"They —" His voice was rough. "They answer me."

The warmth spread through the marks again. This time she couldn't pretend it was imagination. Her stomach tightened. Nothing about that should be possible.

The Eitr in his blood. The dragon-thing the Order had been distilling into him since he was a boy, drop by careful drop. It recognised what her mother had folded into her spine. Nothing loud. Nothing either of them could have explained to a stranger. Two strings tuned to the same note, humming when one was struck.

She turned her face into the pillow. She pressed her cheek there and held still until she could speak.

"I didn't know that was possible," she said into the linen.

"Neither did I."

He pressed his mouth to the youngest mark again, and this time it was something else. Two things in the world made to be apart, finding each other anyway. Eighteen years of his Order trying to shape him into a weapon. Twenty-five years of her mother shaping her into a door. Neither working had quite held.

She rolled beneath him until she saw his face. His hair had fallen forward. His gaze was on her the way it had been at the doorway, and it did the same thing to her chest it had done then, only now there was nowhere to look away to.

"Don't memorise me." Her voice cracked. Because if he did, it meant some part of him believed there might not be another chance.

"Too late."

She closed her eyes. She sensed him lower himself over her, his weight a thing she'd not known she was hungry for. His hand came up and cupped her face, his thumb at the corner of her mouth where it had been outside.

He didn't stay there.

His mouth moved down. Throat, collarbone. At Jovana's stars he lingered, a silent acknowledgement passing through his touch before he continued without comment, as if he'd decided they were hers and not a question for him. Sternum. The soft place beneath her ribs where her breath had already gone shallow. He took his time. He learned her the way he'd learned the marks on her spine, in order, slowly, as if there were a sequence to be respected.

She lifted onto her elbows to watch him.

He lifted his eyes to hers without lifting his head. His gaze went through her ribs the way it always did.

"Lysander."

"Mm."

"What are you —"

"Lie back."

She didn't lie back. Watching him was better.

He set his hand flat against her belly and pressed her gently down. She let him. The mattress was at her shoulder blades. The lamp burned at the edge of her vision, low, and gold.

He pressed his open mouth to the hollow of her hip. Then to the inside of her thigh. The metal hand rested above her knee, cool and certain,

holding her open with a steadiness she couldn't have matched on her own. She understood what the two hands were telling her.

Her hand went into his hair without her deciding to put it there.

His hand slid up the inside of her other thigh slowly, watching her face. He stopped a hair's breadth from where she wanted him. He waited.

"Lysander —"

"I want to hear you."

"You will."

"Now."

"*Please.*" The word escaped her lips completely unbidden. She hadn't said *please* to anyone in years.

He made a sound against her thigh that might have been a laugh and might have been something else and lowered his mouth to her.

The world went very quiet.

His hand replaced what his mouth had begun, and his mouth moved up, slow, deliberate, learning her shape by trial. He didn't rush. His patience was that of a man who'd decided this was the only thing in the world. The metal hand at her thigh didn't move. It didn't need to.

The sound she made didn't stay in. She let it go.

Her hand tightened in his hair. He answered the tightening with his mouth; found a rhythm she couldn't have asked for in words. She couldn't have spoken if he'd asked her to. She arched up to meet him. He met her back.

When she came, it came sudden, sharper than she expected, her whole spine going taut, the marks along it lighting in a sequence beneath her skin she couldn't see. Her own breath broke with his name on her lips.

He stayed where he was until she stopped trembling.

Then he lifted his head, and his hand came up and wiped his mouth with the back of it, and the look on his face was new. Something between satisfied and undone.

"Idonea."

"Don't."

"Don't what?"

"Don't say anything clever."

A short breath against the inside of her thigh. "I wasn't going to."

She reached down and pulled him up by the shoulders.

His mouth came back to hers. She tasted herself on him and didn't look away from him while she did. His hand framed her jaw. The metal one slid up her side, anchored at her ribs, settled at her hip.

"Idonea. Look at me."

She did. "Yes?"

"Yes, what?"

"Yes, Lysander."

He pushed into her slowly. She arched up to meet him. The first stroke was deeper than she'd expected. The second was deeper than the first. He held himself there a moment, his forehead against hers, his breath ragged at her cheek.

He didn't move.

"Lysander."

No answer.

"Don't —"

"I'm not."

"You're committing me to memory."

"In case." His voice broke around the word and rebuilt itself. "In case there isn't a second time."

"There will be."

"Then it costs me nothing."

She put her hand against the side of his face and held him there, and he closed his eyes, and they stayed like that until her own breath broke first.

Then he moved, and the feel of him inside her took the last of her thinking.

She wrapped her legs around his waist. The metal arm took his weight. His hand slid down between them, his thumb working in time with the rest of him. She bit his shoulder hard enough to mark it.

"Idonea."

"I know."

"*Idonea* —"

"I know."

He moved harder. She met him. The ache ran down her spine where the ink was. The bed pressed into her shoulder blades. Cold air moved on her thighs where the blanket had fallen back. Underneath it: him, present in her in a way no one had been since Jovana.

His hand framed her jaw. She turned her face into it and bit the soft place at the base of his thumb. He breathed a single word into her hair she'd not thought he would ever say—*please*—and was startled by it, but didn't take it back.

She came a second time with his name in her teeth.

He followed her a few strokes later. His breath broke against her temple. He stayed inside her, braced on the metal arm, his forehead against her collarbone, until he was breathing evenly again.

When he moved, he moved carefully. He drew back, lay down beside her, and pulled her against his chest. The metal hand came over her hip. His other hand settled at the small of her back.

His thumb found the youngest mark on its own, as if it had lived there.

Then it moved, slowly. Up her spine, one mark, then the next, then the next, in the order Nellith had drawn them. Each pause marked a silent beat on her skin. He counted them like precious artefacts, deliberate and slow.

"They went," she said into his chest.

"Mm."

"At the end. They went in sequence. I had no word for it."

"I have a word for it."

She lifted her head. "What."

His hand stilled on the fourth mark. The one Nellith had drawn the year Jovana died. He didn't look at her. He looked at the ceiling.

"The Eitr does it too," he said. "When a Severant finishes. The whole working in his blood lights from the bottom up. The Order calls it the *return*. They tell you it will pass after the first few years. It does not pass. You only learn to expect it."

"You're saying —"

"I am saying your marks did what my blood does."

She put her face back against his chest. She couldn't look at him for a moment. The thing in her ribs was too large.

"That isn't supposed to be possible," she said.

"Neither were we."

The lamp guttered low. Outside, the wind moved against the eaves. Lance, on the windowsill, didn't look in.

For a long while there was only their breathing.

His thumb went back to the youngest mark. It rested there. She thought he would speak. He did not.

After a long while she said, "Lysander."

"Mm."

"You'll come with me into the chapel tomorrow."

"Yes."

"And if it doesn't go well."

"It will go well."

"Lysander."

He turned his face into her hair and breathed in. "I won't leave you in there. Whatever the room is. Whatever you find. I am coming with you. You are not walking that hallway by yourself."

Her eyes burned. She closed them. "All right."

"All right."

She didn't know when she fell asleep. His hand stayed at her back. The metal one stayed at her hip. His breath was even in her hair when she stopped thinking about what was waiting in the morning.

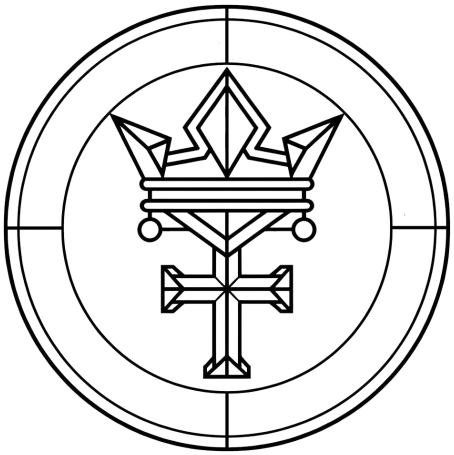
The last thing she registered was the youngest mark under the pad of his thumb, warm in a way the others were not, answering him still, hours after the rest of her had gone quiet.

The room smelled of him. Pine and nutmeg, the way it always had at a distance. And underneath, closer in than she'd ever been to it: cedar oil from the sword-handle, iron from the blade, and brass.

She had been smelling iron on him every day since the basement.

She had never smelled where it lived.

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Chapter 36

Idonea stirred beneath the blankets. Every muscle in her body screamed in protest. She lay listening to the steady breath behind her, the second heartbeat against her back. Lysander's arm draped over her waist, loose but possessive even in sleep.

When she shifted, his hold tightened, not enough to trap, only enough to remind her he was there.

“You’re awake,” he said, voice low and rough from sleep.

“So are you.”

He huffed a quiet laugh against her hair, the warmth of it stirring something deep in her chest. "Don't tell me you were planning to leave without me."

Idonea's lips pressed into a thin line. *I was, actually.* But she couldn't say it, not when his arm tightened a fraction more, as though he'd heard the thought.

She turned towards him at last, meeting the storm in his eyes. There was no yielding there, no chance of convincing him otherwise. He had made his choice as surely as she'd made hers.

Idonea knew it was smart to bring him—a Severant, a Daemonbreaker—when she knew she’d have to face Vinea. But the thought of him walking into that chamber, of him bleeding for her again, made something inside her crack and ache.

“You’re a fool,” she said, pressing her forehead against his chest. The steady thrum of his heartbeat grounded her in a way nothing else could.

He tilted her face up, his mouth curving in the barest ghost of a smile. “I'm staying.”

She sighed. “Then let us go. Time is not our friend. " She paused, swallowing. "But first, I need to check on Alcaeus."

They dressed in silence, and outside her sight hovered on the terraced house where the Templars remained trapped. There were no visible signs of them breaking out, yet.

Lance flew down from the roof, spiralling around them both before flying up and near them as they walked towards the hospice.

Alcaeus lay on a simple cot in the corner, blankets pulled up to his chest. His face was pale, taut, but the steady rise and fall of his chest told her more than any words could.

“Father?” Her voice cracked, and she stepped closer.

Alcaeus’s eyes fluttered open, recognising her instantly. A weak smile touched his lips, even in exhaustion. “Idonea,” he rasped.

Her fingers brushed the back of his hand, warm against the coolness of the blankets. “You need to rest. I will save you.”

His gaze sharpened. “But?”

Idonea drew a slow breath, unsure how to put the storm in her chest into words. “I must see this through. But I wanted to know you’re safe.”

Alcaeus’s hand rose, weak but insistent, and brushed her cheek. “You carry more than anyone should. Remember … to breathe.”

“I will,” she said, pressing her forehead against his hand. “And I’ll return. I promise.”

His eyes closed briefly, exhaustion overtaking him.

Idonea’s throat tightened. She forced herself to turn away before she could think too hard about whether promises counted if the person making them never returned.

Balmo shifted impatiently on the path ahead, the imp's leathery skin shifting in the half-light, its crooked tusks catching the gleam of the morning sun. Lance hovered near her shoulder, wings twitching in readiness.

Lysander tensed beside her, his hand drifting to the hilt of his sword.

"We need its help," Idonea whispered, laying her fingers briefly against his wrist.

The doors of the chapel groaned as they swung inward, dust falling from their hinges. The familiar musty scent of incense and damp stone wrapped around them.

Balmo skittered ahead, claws clicking over the worn stone. Its ears twitched constantly, catching every creak, every distant echo.

The nave stretched endlessly, pews shrouded in shadow. When Balmo stopped at the altar and hissed, the stone beneath them shuddered. With a lurch, the floor behind the dais split apart, revealing a spiralling stair descending into darkness.

“Great,” Lysander muttered.

“Deeper,” Balmo croaked, grinning as if pleased.

They followed the imp down. Lance hesitated, then dove after them with a low hiss, his scales shimmering faintly in the gloom.

Balmo darted ahead, pausing frequently, turning its head as if listening for the unseen currents of the daemon plane.

Stone walls closed in around them as they wound deeper, the air growing cooler, tinged with the metallic scent of hidden Current veins. Shadows shifted unnaturally, as if aware of their intrusion. Idonea held her hand forward, feeling the Current hum in response to her presence.

“Something is off,” Lysander said. “The air itself … it’s heavier here.”

“Yes,” she replied, scanning the walls. “The daemon’s influence … it’s buried, layered beneath wards. It’s hiding deeper than I expected. But it is here.”

The passage twisted suddenly, leading into a wide corridor that split into three near-identical archways. Idonea hesitated. “This is exactly why I needed the imp. I would never find the right path without it.”

Balmo clicked its claws and leapt to the central arch. “This way,” it rasped, voice low but authoritative.

Lysander’s brow furrowed. “You trust it implicitly?”

Idonea shot him a glance, tension coiling around her ribs. “I don’t have a choice.”

They followed Balmo, twisting through the corridors. The walls narrowed and widened unpredictably, and the ceiling hung low in some areas, forcing them to duck. Stone stairs led down and then back up, sometimes with hidden landings covered in centuries of dust.

Time stretched in the maze-like corridors. Lance occasionally hissed at shadows, wings brushing the walls, while Balmo darted ahead, clearly impatient but attuned to the hidden energies. Idonea’s legs ached, and she could feel sweat matting her hair to her forehead, but she pushed on. The corridor seemed longer when she looked back.

Balmo chittered, perching on a ledge above them. “There. Below.” It pointed with a clawed hand towards a narrow corridor veiled in shadow.

The stone floor sloped downward, disappearing into pitch-black. Lance hissed once, clearly reluctant, but he remained obedient.

They broke into a cavernous chamber at last, its ceiling swallowed by shadow. The lantern’s glow barely touched the upper reaches, leaving the stone above them to loom like the underside of a great ribcage. The walls were etched with glyphs so old they no longer sat still beneath the eye; they crawled when the light passed over them, lines flexing as if remembering motion.

At the far end yawned an archway sealed by three concentric rings of dark metal.

A pressure sat behind her eyes, a tightening low in her ribs, the familiar ache of something warded too tightly for comfort. The metal exuded cold, but at its centre burned a heat that licked at her skin, sharp and intimate, like breath against a wound.

Balmo let out a low, delighted cackle. “Old door,” it croaked. “Hungry one. Likes pain. Likes truth better.”

“Charming,” Lysander said, eyeing the daemon.

Idonea stepped closer.

The outer ring was carved with resonant glyphs, smooth and precise, their symmetry soothing. They hummed faintly at her approach, a sound too low to hear properly, more vibration than noise. The inner ring was jagged, scarred with Riven marks cut deep into the metal, each line sharp enough to catch the light like a blade. The third ring lay between them, blank but for fractured grooves that looked less carved than broken open.

A lock, then. A cage within a cage. Her fingers hovered inches from the metal. She didn't touch it yet.

“It’s like the Lodamante,” she murmured. “Layered. Built to choke the Current unless it’s coaxed exactly right.”

Lysander shifted beside her. “And if it isn’t?”

“It pushes back.”

She didn't add *hard*, or *cruelly*. The door already knew.

She laid her palms against the outer ring. The glyphs shuddered beneath her skin, warmth blooming through the cold as the metal recognised her. A thin thread of Current stirred, tentative as a waking limb. The hum deepened, vibrating up her arms and into her chest.

The door breathed.

Idonea drew in a careful breath and fed it more. Slow, deliberate, the way she'd learned to do when blood was already spilling, and restraint mattered more than force. The outer ring turned, not smoothly, but with resistance, metal screeching faintly.

Then the backlash came.

The vibration spiked, sharp enough to rattle her teeth. The Current surged erratically, skidding along the grooves, searching for purchase.

Lysander moved without asking. His hands closed around her forearms, solid and unyielding, pinning her in place when her knees threatened to buckle. His grip was firm enough to bruise, not cruel, but absolute.

“Don’t let it rush you,” he said low, close to her ear. “It wants you off-balance.”

She hated how right he was. Hated how her body leaned into the steadiness anyway, even as her pulse roared in her ears.

“I know,” she said, teeth clenched. “Don’t let go.”

“I won’t.”

She adjusted, easing the Current back, letting it flow like water instead of blood. The outer ring slowed, then aligned, the resonant glyphs clicking into harmony one by one until the vibration smoothed into a steady pulse.

The door quieted, waiting. Idonea turned to the inner ring.

The heat struck immediately, a sharp, punishing burn that crawled up her fingers and into her wrists. The Riven marks throbbed beneath her touch, eager and resentful, recognising her not as a key, but as a wound they remembered inflicting.

Her pulse leapt. The door drank it in.

She swallowed hard and pressed her hand flat against the jagged metal.

Pain bloomed. Not enough to break skin, but enough to make her breath falter. The ring resisted her, grinding beneath her palm, pushing back against her will with violence.

Lysander’s grip tightened. “Easy,” he murmured. “You’re bleeding into it.”

“I have to.” She gasped. “It won’t listen otherwise.” Everything wanted pieces of her.

The ring turned, grinding, each inch of movement dragging a response from her body. Sweat slicked her spine. Her vision swam, edges darkening as the Current surged and snapped, desperate for release.

The door wanted more than strength. It wanted surrender.

She forced herself to slow, to guide instead of demand, shaping the Current with memory and instinct rather than pain. The heat dulled, the resistance easing just enough to allow the ring to lock into place with a dull, satisfied thud.

Idonea sagged forward, breath ragged.

Lysander caught her fully this time, one arm braced across her chest, the other firm at her back, holding her upright as the chamber rang with the aftershock.

“One left,” he whispered.

She lifted her head and looked at the final ring. The blank grooves waited.

She didn't move from Lysander's arms, couldn't, not yet, with her legs still trembling and her breath coming ragged against his chest. But her gaze drifted to the third ring, and for the first time she truly looked at it.

Her stomach dropped. She had taken the grooves for damage. They had looked, from a few paces back, like the marks of something old and abused; a place the metal had been pried open by force, an old wound in the door.

They were not damage. They were sockets.

She stilled. She stepped forward, half-pulling him with her, until the lantern's light fell against the third ring at close range. She had to lean within a hand's breadth of the metal before her glasses resolved the carving's details. The sockets came clear.

The sockets ran in a short, careful arc along one segment of the ring; not the whole circumference, only a stretch of it. They had been set into the metal like beads pressed into fresh clay. None of them was old. The earliest had begun to settle into the surrounding metal, the edges softening, but only a little. The newest were clean cuts, the metal still bright at their lips.

Each socket held a tooth.

The world tilted. Idonea's hand flew to her mouth, a strangled sound escaping her throat. She counted them without meaning to.

Three. And one empty.

Three children Elzhbeta had killed and pried open and pressed into this door like beads into clay. Three sockets filled. One socket empty, freshly cut, the metal still bright at its lips. Waiting.

Mine.

She had known, in the cottage with Elzhbeta, that something dreadful had been planned for her. She hadn't understood how dreadful. She hadn't

understood *this*.

Knowing it now, seeing the socket cut and waiting, was different.

The breath went out of her entirely. Her knees didn't hold this time. Lysander caught her completely, bracing her against his chest, his face turned towards the ring she couldn't stop looking at.

"That one." She lifted her free hand. Her finger shook. "That one is mine."

"Idonea, look at me."

She didn't look at him.

Balmo, beside them, made a soft chittering sound that was the laugh of a creature recognising something it'd heard described in legend but never expected to see. "Mouth door," it said, in a reverent voice. "Mouth door. Long work. Long work."

Lance hissed from her shoulder. His wings brushed against her neck. He didn't lift from her shoulder, he stayed.

Idonea closed her eyes. She held them closed for a count that Lysander didn't interrupt.

When she opened them, she was steadier.

"We have to keep going."

"Are you—"

"No. Don't ask me yet. After."

Lysander pressed his forehead briefly to hers. He didn't speak. He let her go without letting go; his arm slid down to her waist, anchoring her without holding her in place.

She turned to the door, pressing her palm to the last ring. The grooves flared faintly red at her touch, warmth bleeding outward like a pulse beneath skin. The third ring warmed.

Images crowded her mind; fractured, half-remembered, sharp as broken glass. The ring turned, not smoothly, but as if it were aligning itself to her rather than the other way around.

The Resonant glyphs had aligned to her because she'd worked them. The Riven marks had aligned to her because she'd bled. The third ring was aligning to her because she was the one it had been built to align to.

The thought arrived in her like a hand laid against the back of her neck. It didn't belong to her. It came from somewhere underneath the door, the same place the breath of warmth was coming from, the same place she'd been feeling her mother since the relic page first split open in her mind.

Her breath stuttered.

The Current surged, threatening to spill, and Lysander leaned in, bracing her, containing the tremor through sheer force of presence. The strain rippled through him as well—jaw clenched, shoulders rigid—as he held her steady without understanding the thing that moved through her.

The final lock clicked. The chamber fell abruptly, unnaturally silent.

Balmo let out a delighted cackle, tail flicking. Lance hissed, but remained close, as if sensing the shift in energy.

The rings stilled. The heat withdrew. The door rumbled, then parted just enough to allow her through, the air beyond shimmering with restrained power.

Idonea swayed, suddenly hollow.

Lysander's hands lingered at her arms, reluctant. "Idonea—"

She shook her head, already stepping forward.

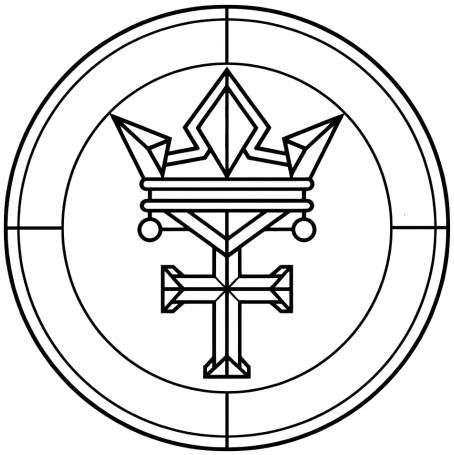
"This part is mine."

Lysander's hand brushed hers, fingers intertwining briefly, an unspoken promise.

She crossed the threshold.

The door sealed behind her.

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Chapter 37

She expected the chamber. Instead, the floor went out from under her.

The stone dissolved without warning. Her boots met nothing, and for a long second she fell, the dark whipping past her face, cold iron in her teeth. She didn't scream. She had time to think she should have.

Her feet struck ground that was not the chamber she'd been walking toward. This was not where she'd meant to go.

The cold hit her first, sharp as a blade pressed to the back of her neck. The air smelled of old smoke and something more. Above her there was no sky. A black so flat it pressed against her eyes, eating the fog from her breath before it rose.

Beneath her boots, the ground was cracked stone, weeping a faint dull glow where the cracks ran. Daemon-plane stone. She had only read about it. Walking on it was a thing she'd hoped never to do.

A figure stood ten paces ahead. Her mother's shape was unmistakable before the figure turned.

"You came," Nellith said.

The voice cut through the dark like a needle pulled through cloth. It didn't echo; there was nothing to echo against.

Idonea didn't move, her hands curling at her sides. The dagger at her hip was no comfort here.

"You left without a word."

Nellith tilted her head. The surrounding shadows shifted as she did — living shadows, the kind that watched. "Did I? Or did I leave the way I always intended to leave?"

"Father told me what you are."

A pause, then: "Father, now. Not Alcaeus."

"He's dying. Daemon poisoning."

Nellith's mouth flickered. "He should never have been the keeper of this place."

Idonea's jaw set. She didn't trust herself to answer.

Nellith took a step forward. Her boots made no sound on the cracked stone the way Idonea's had.

"I have been proud of you," Nellith said. "Can Alcaeus say the same?"

"Don't."

"I thought not." Nellith blinked. A fraction too slowly.

Idonea's hands shook. She forced them still. "I'm not here for your games."

"You are here because I called you. That is not a game. That is a homecoming."

Idonea had spent most of her life trying to find home. Nellith hadn't been it.

"I won't open the Nexis."

Nellith stopped three paces away. Up close, her eyes were not the obsidian Idonea remembered. They had something behind them now — a slow turning, like dark water moving over a deep current.

"Child," her mother said, soft. "You are the blood of dragons. The child of wyrm and Current. You think you can refuse the thing you were made for?"

Idonea drew a slow breath. The air burned faintly in her lungs. "I am not yours." The words rang true, yet they remained agonisingly complex.

Nellith lifted her hand. The Current came at her like a thrown weight.

Idonea was on one knee before she knew her body had moved. The cold ground bit through her trousers, her shoulder, and her palm where she caught herself. Her own Current rose to meet the strike and was driven back, ringing in her bones like a struck bell. She had never had Current push like that. Not in any working. Not from Nellith. Not from anyone.

The daemon plane should've eaten it. The vapours should've smothered it. Her mother was wielding Current here as if the plane itself made way for her.

Nellith lowered her hand. "Such fire," she said. "Such stubbornness. I made you well."

Idonea didn't stand yet. Her knee stayed on the stone, and she breathed. "Tell me what you want."

"For you to understand, child. The relic, the Nexis, the marks I gave you — they are part of something larger than what you have allowed yourself to see."

"I don't care."

"I know. That is the problem."

The shadows around Nellith stretched. They reached, not at Idonea, but past her, tasting the air for her edges. One slid briefly along the back of her hand. It was warm, not cold. That was worse.

She stood. Her knees didn't betray her; she made sure of it. "I came here to break what you built. That has not changed."

Nellith smiled at her. The smile was not unkind. That was the worst thing about it. "And yet, here you are."

Far off, in a place Idonea couldn't see, something growled.

Then another, closer. Then a third. The daemons were aware of her.

Her pulse climbed; she needed something. She had no access to the Current and the daemon plane was eating her edges. She needed a channel.

She blinked. The thought came as cleanly as the needle on her spine had come, years ago. *Eitr.*

Other than Current. Other than what she'd been reaching for. The substance she'd been smelling on Lysander for months without naming, distilled by the Order from dragon-bled roots, the same matter the witchwyrms had been made of before the Sundering scattered them into the soil.

The relic had been calling to it. Idonea understood, with a flash of perfect lucidity, that the relic had been pulling Eitr through itself into the Nexis for as long as the working had been preparing. This region of the daemon plane was changed. It was a poisoned threshold, a place where dragon-substance had been bleeding into devourer-substance, and the bleeding hadn't yet finished.

No wonder Vinea was desperate. He had been calling the door open into a region of his own home that was becoming toxic to him.

The Eitr was here because the working had brought it. And Idonea, Idonea with firstborn blood in her veins, Idonea who'd been shaped by her mother's hand to receive what the daemons could not, could reach for it.

She let her breath out and reached.

The Eitr didn't come to her the way the Current did. Instead of flowing, it gave, like a hand pressed against another hand, letting her draw from it.

Violet-black light curled along her fingertips.

Nellith's eyes narrowed. "Clever girl."

"I had a good teacher."

"You did."

Idonea didn't move yet. The Eitr in her palms was hot in a way her own Current was not. The plane was letting her stand here, and there was no telling how long the permission would last.

"I will leave here alive," she said. "Or I will not. I will not serve you. And the relic should not exist."

Nellith looked at her for a long moment.

For the first time since the dark had gone flat overhead, something passed across her mother's face that was neither certainty nor fear. Frustration, maybe.

She laughed once, softly. "Very well, child. Take your path."

She lifted her hand again. The dark in front of Idonea split.

"But you will not touch the relic without paying. I made sure of that, too."

The split widened. Through it Idonea saw the chamber she'd been walking toward; the stone walls, the carved glyphs, the pedestal at the centre, and the relic resting on it in its low gold light.

Nellith was not coming with her. The dark was sending her back, alone, to where she'd been trying to go.

Idonea didn't thank her, nor look back. She stepped through.

The chamber was very still.

The dark behind her sealed itself. The cold-iron smell went. Stone walls returned around her, the warm gold light of the pedestal soft on the curved walls. The sound of her own breathing came back to her for the first time since the void.

No one else was with her.

Lysander couldn't be here. Balmo could not. Even Lance could not. She had crossed the threshold; this room was sealed off the way a sanctum was sealed. The seal at her back was something she could feel. Both a pressure and held breath.

The relic was on the pedestal.

It was smaller than she'd expected — neither large nor heavy-looking. The Heart of Ffyrnedd, the thing she'd crossed two countries to find, was the size of a child's fist. Pale gold, faintly veined with darker gold beneath

the surface, the way a wrist has veins. It glowed, pulsing with a rhythm alongside her own pulse.

She didn't yet lift her hand to it; instead, she walked the pedestal once.

The glyphs at her feet were old, older than the wards that had sealed the rings. The light from the relic caught them and made them crawl. She'd seen a glance of them once before, in the dragon-eye chamber below the larder. The same hand. The same line.

Her mother's line. The realisation slammed into her chest, stealing her breath. Her fingers trembled against the cold stone, and the chamber tilted around her. *Nellith. Even here. Even now.* She forced herself to breathe, to steady, and set her boots on either side of the pedestal.

She stretched both hands out, palms down, and lowered them until they met the relic.

It was warm. Warmer than she'd thought it would be.

The moment her skin touched it, something rushed up through her arms.

She saw, for one fractured count, the Nexis: doors, more doors than she could number, opening and closing in slow waves. Daemons behind some. Light behind others. Shadows that were not exactly shadows. The Heart was a map. It was undeniable. The Heart of Ffyrnedd had been carved from a witchwyrm because witchwyrms had been the first creatures to walk between the worlds, and what they had been was *path-finders*. The relic was a key because their hearts had been keys.

Her own pulse stuttered against the relic's. Then a different pressure. The relic was looking at her. Looking for something. The relic knew who she was. Idonea wished it didn't.

The relic's will pressed against her own curiously. It wanted her to take it. She closed her hands around it, and it came up off the pedestal lightly.

Far behind her, somewhere underneath the seal at her back, a voice she'd been working not to hear since the dark went flat said her name.

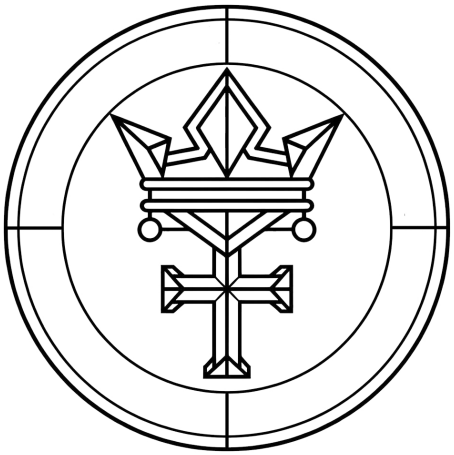
Idonea.

She didn't answer.

Stepping back from the pedestal, she held the relic against her ribs. It was still warm.

She turned towards the door.

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Chapter 38

The relic vibrated in her palms. Her breath steamed in the cold vault. The world beyond the seal waited for her to come back to it.

She stepped back from the pedestal. A hairline crack had opened in the stone where the relic had rested. Current bled from the crack into the air, the pressure of it constant.

A voice came down the chamber.

The air grew thick, pressing against her skin like the stale breath of a closed room. A second voice sliced through the density.

A shadow moved at the chamber's far end. Then a shape that swallowed the surrounding light.

Nellith.

Idonea's breath caught painfully in her throat. *No. Not here. Not now.*

Beside her, prowling low, came the daemon.

Vinea was bigger than Idonea had imagined. The corridor behind them seemed barely wide enough to admit his bulk. Lion and man at once. Mane that flicked in patterns no fur should make. In one clawed hand he carried a viper, alive, coiling around his wrist. His eyes were the colour of old fire. They fixed on the relic in her hands and didn't look away.

Nellith smiled. "At last."

Her grip tightened around the relic until her knuckles whitened.

Vinea's mouth opened. The teeth inside were crystalline, set unevenly, and the sight of them turned her stomach. "The child holds the heart."

Balmo hissed at Idonea's shoulder. "Told you. They want it. Want you."

Idonea pressed the relic against her chest. "Nellith." Her voice came out hoarse. "I told you I wouldn't give you this. Why are you here?"

"I have never let you go, Idonea." Her mother's voice was soft. The voice from her childhood. The voice that had hummed lullabies. "Not since I saw what you were."

"An experiment." The word tasted like ash.

Nellith's eyes widened. "You are the *crucible*." She stepped forward, and the surrounding shadows stepped with her. "The one thing strong enough to change the world. I bred you for this. I have loved you for it. You cannot imagine how long I waited."

Loved. The word her mother had so rarely used, never like this.

Vinea didn't wait. He paced forward, every step shaking dust loose from the chamber's ancient stones. "Give it to me, little witch. Or I will take it from your corpse."

Idonea took a step back. The Current in her arms responded, coiling around her bones like a wire pulled taut.

"You can't open the Nexis," she whispered.

Nellith sighed. "Vinea wishes to see the worlds joined. He is a creature of appetite and longing. I…" her face shifted, briefly. "I want you to survive what comes next. If the world burns for it, so be it."

Vinea lowered his head. His eyes' amber brightened until it hurt to look directly. "You were made to open the Nexis. My kin hunger for your light."

"Stay away from her." Lysander's voice came from the chamber's mouth.

He stumbled into view, battered, his sword gone. Blood streaked his temple, and his hand pressed against his ribs as though trying to hold himself together. Lance circled overhead, careful of the daemon's reach, his wings cutting sharp arcs through the gloom.

Vinea snorted. "The Severant survives. How touching."

Idonea's hand twitched. The urge to run sat in her throat; she didn't act on it. Vinea would run her down, and Nellith wouldn't stop him.

Nellith's eyes flicked to Lysander. The smile on her mouth was that of a person who'd finished a long task.

"You have done your part," she said. "You brought her to the brink."

"I brought her here to stop you." Lysander's voice cracked with strain.

"Did you?" Nellith's smile widened. "You brought her exactly where she needed to be. You protected her. You made her strong. Your use is at its end."

She nodded to Vinea.

"*No*—"

The daemon moved.

Idonea missed the strike. The unmistakable impact of bone hitting stone rang out, a sound to haunt her for the rest of her life. Lysander folded, and her scream stuck behind her teeth.

The relic was a thousand voices now, every one of them hungry.

Balmo crowded close to her elbow, its claws digging into her sleeve. "If you have trick. Now would be time. Daemon will not wait."

"What do you want from me?" Her voice came out flat. "Do you want me to use it? Is that what you have been waiting for?"

Nellith's eyes shone. "That is the only way you win. The only way you live."

Vinea's gaze returned to the relic in her hands. The viper at his wrist hissed in time with his breathing.

"Let me in." His voice was a pressure against the walls of the chamber, and the walls bent inward to meet it. "Let us in. The old world is dying. It is time to begin again."

Lysander pushed himself up onto one elbow. Blood ran from his temple into his eye. "Don't do it." His voice was ragged. "Don't become what she wants."

She tried to look at anything but her mother and the daemon. Dyota came into her mind. The long road that had brought her here.

For a single moment, she wondered what would happen if she dropped the relic. Walked away. It'd be easier, letting someone else do it.

Balmo's claw caught her elbow. "Balance, witch."

Vinea surged.

"Now."

The chamber air ruptured, stone fractured. Reality itself broke around her. A million voices pressed against her thinking, every one of them wanting.

In the last moment before she could no longer choose, she looked at her mother.

Nellith smiled. "Show them."

And Idonea, out of spite, or hope, or having never once learned how to quit, fed the relic her name.

There was no falling. Only a wrench, like a tooth pulled.

She landed, and the Nexis received her.

The ground was split obsidian, the cracks bleeding orange and gold from inside the stone. Under her boots it was neither quite rock nor quite

liquid; it shifted when her weight changed. The sky above was black, threaded through with lightning that didn't move the way lightning moved. The air smelled of burnt iron and old copper.

Lysander rolled to his knees beside her, cursing. Lance came down from somewhere overhead with Lysander's sword in his jaw and dropped it on the stone. The blade rang.

Nellith was there. So was Vinea.

They were not what they had been in the chamber.

Vinea's true shape had come out of him. He stood twice the height of the chamber-form, his mane a moving thing made of weather rather than fur. Lightning ran between his horns in slow arcs. His claws scored the obsidian when he set his weight, and where the claws struck, fresh lava welled. The viper in his hand was the size of a man's leg now, hissing the way a kettle hisses approaching boil.

Nellith floated. Her feet were not on the ground. Her eyes were slit, the way Lance's were. Her hands ended in claws. Light around her made the shadows behind her wrong.

Balmo cowered behind a spire of fractured crystal, every tooth showing. Coming to the Nexis hadn't been its plan.

The relic's power leaked into Idonea's arms. She hadn't unlocked it fully. Enough to tempt the daemon. She held the rest behind her teeth.

Thunder cracked above. A bolt of white-gold lightning fell between her and Lysander, the heat of it sucking the air from her lungs. The obsidian liquefied where it struck. She leapt clear. Her boots came away tacky.

Vinea's voice rolled across the plane, everywhere at once.

"Welcome home, little witch." A pause. "I have been waiting longer than any of them know."

A funnel of glass and red sand spun up around them, herding them towards the centre of the broken plain. Idonea braced herself. She cut her palm with her dagger and let the blood circle her feet.

Vinea stalked the perimeter, immense, swaying with each step.

"So much power, and you fear to use it. Let it break you, child. That is what you're made for."

Lysander pulled himself upright. The sword Lance had dropped was at his foot. He picked it up and stood, and even on this plane, even bleeding, he looked at her the way he'd looked at her in the village, in the chamber, in her own bed.

"Stay with me!"

She turned to him. She didn't have time to answer with her mouth. She nodded and hoped he understood every word she couldn't say.

Vinea brought his paw down.

The obsidian fountained upward, arcing into the storm, and rained back down as glass shards the size of arrowheads. Lance went into the air and worked. He knocked them out of the sky before they could pierce her, his wings cutting through the falling glass too fast to track. Some got through anyway. Her skin opened in bright cuts along her arms, her cheek, her collarbone.

She reached for the relic's power and pushed.

The Nexis pushed back. The Eitr wouldn't go where she sent it. The plane was eating her working as fast as she could make it.

A claw came through the air where her head had just been.

She twisted aside.

Lysander struck.

Steel met flesh. His blade went across Vinea's flank. The impact rang the way iron rings when struck against stone. Sparks of lightning jumped from the wound. Vinea recoiled, more annoyed than hurt.

"You cannot win here," the daemon said.

He raked his claws across the air. A wall of lightning came at them.

She pulled the violet-black Eitr down her arms the way she'd pulled it in the void with her mother. It met Vinea's lightning — daemon-substance shaped into light, not mortal-storm lightning — and the two annihilated where they touched. The shock rang through her bones. The lightning broke, and the cloud above it dimmed.

The storm went still. The world shook.

On her hands and knees on the obsidian, fingers in the molten cracks, copper and salt in her mouth — her chest hurt. She did not, for a second, remember what plane she was on.

Her glasses were gone. When they had come off, she couldn't say.

The Nexis blurred at the edges of what she could see. Shapes had soft borders. Vinea, when she looked up, was an outline of teeth and the suggestion of weight. Nellith was a slim dark figure, recognisable only because Idonea knew her silhouette.

Fighting without them was now necessary.

Lysander dropped beside her. His hands closed on her shoulders. "Don't let her in your head."

She looked up at Nellith.

"My poor child," Nellith said.

But Nellith hadn't moved. She had stayed on the far side of the broken plain with her arms folded. For the first time, her mother looked old.

The storm came back at once.

Vinea's tail lashed. New trenches opened in the obsidian. "You're finished," he said. "But you can choose how you die. Scream, and I will make it quick."

Lysander's voice was at her ear, low and steady. "Don't hold back, witchling."

She didn't hold back.

The violet-black wrapped her arms in coils thick as rope. The Eitr lashed out from her in a single concentrated strike. It met Vinea full at the chest. The daemon roared, the sound carrying across the plane and ringing back to her from somewhere distant.

Lance shrieked above her, fighting the storm.

She poured more in. Her blood took up its own song. The relic answered. Nothing in this place ever hesitated. Current and Eitr braided together along her ribs and ran out of her down her arms.

Lysander dropped to his knees and shielded his eyes from the light of it.

Even Nellith stepped back.

Vinea reeled.

His body cracked. Molten gold bled out of him. The surrounding air twisted, and the storm he was at the centre of folded inward and ate itself. His form blurred, came apart and was gone.

Idonea fell to her knees, the relic dropping from her hand to lie on the obsidian, faintly glowing.

Lance landed on her shoulder. He pressed his head against her cheek.

Lysander reached her side. He pressed his lips to her temple. "Did you __"

"I think so."

She did not, in truth, know. The relic on the ground gave one weak pulse, then went quiet. Her shoulders dropped without her permission. The

black sky overhead held still. For a count of two, her body decided the worst was finished.

She turned her face into Lysander's neck. He smelled of pine and nutmeg and iron, even here.

Then, from somewhere her body should not have been, Nellith laughed.

Thunder rolled overhead. The black sky split and a colossal shape moved in the clouds.

A viper slithered up out of the obsidian beside the relic.

Vinea reformed in the air above them, twice the size he'd been. His mane was a crown of moving lightning now, the arcs jumping continuously between his horns. He came down. Both his paws struck the obsidian, and the plane shattered around them.

Idonea stared up at him, numb. Lance hissed low, flaring his wings.

A bolt of lightning shot from the daemon's jaw and split the plain in two. Idonea barely managed to roll, dragging Lysander with her. Lance went up.

Vinea prowled forward, laughing, every step its own earthquake.

"You cannot kill what is true. Not with borrowed power."

Lightning ripped across the sky. Wind screamed. The wind lifted shards of molten rock and threw them. Lance darted through it the way a swallow darts through summer rain, nimble, fast.

Vinea's voice rolled over the thunder.

"Storms don't die."

His claws came through the air. A second bolt of lightning came down.

Idonea got her hands up. She made a shield of Eitr, with not enough strength behind it. The bolt hit. The impact threw her back across the obsidian, and what went through her chest was the pain of something tearing.

Vinea came on. She had lost sight of Nellith.

"You will never rival what I am."

A second bolt formed above her. The cloud went bright with it.

She tried to summon another shield. The Eitr sputtered out of her hands. She had been pushing too long. Her head was full of high white sound. Her wounds were bleeding heavily. Current and Eitr both, for the first time, were not within her reach.

The lightning came down.

A white column of fire.

Someone put himself between her and it.

"*LYSANDER—*"

The world went white.

The thunderclap shook the air out of her chest.

When she blinked through the after-image, Lysander was standing in front of her, his sword planted in the obsidian to keep himself upright. Smoke was coming off his mechanical arm. The brass was blackened. Where the bolt had struck, the metal had split. Her insides twisted.

Then his knees went.

"*Lysander*!"

She got under him before he hit the ground. His weight nearly took her with him. She lowered him as gently as she could. His breathing was shallow. His skin was branched with dark lines, like a path of lightning that had reached him through the brass.

"You idiot. Why would you—"

"Wanted to see if the new arm could take it."

"That's not funny."

"It's a little funny."

He coughed. There was blood in it. His good hand came up and found her cheek and stayed there, cold against her skin. The fingers that had been steady against her jaw the night before were not steady now. The promise from the night before flashed through her head.

"Witchling." His voice was thin. "If I don't — you finish this. You walk out. You find your sister. *Promise me.*"

She pressed her forehead against his. The skin was cold; hers was hot.

"All right."

"All right," he echoed.

Vinea's laugh came down on them. "How touching." The daemon raised his claws. "Now you both die."

She spat blood at him.

Idonea was a single bruise. Her skin had opened in too many places to count. The blood was running over her hands faster than she could close any of it. There was no sign of Nellith anywhere. Vinea was where she'd to keep her focus.

She caught a flicker of scales in the chaos, Lance, banking hard. A moment later he was back at her shoulder, her cracked frames hooked in his

jaw. He set them into her palm with the precision of a creature who'd been watching her search for them every morning since Draugaros.

She jammed them crookedly onto her face. The left lens was cracked, but it was enough.

She cut her palm with her dagger and let the blood fountain. She let it soak into the obsidian.

The daemon plane answered.

Current. Eitr. A third thing darker beneath them both, older, kin to her on this plane in a way she'd not asked to be kin.

Her hands shook, eyes slit, nails lengthened.

"No," Lysander rasped, his hand tightening on her wrist. "Idonea — don't."

Crimson threads rose out of the obsidian and curled around her arms like living veins. The Eitr met them. The relic, in the place she'd dropped it, hummed and joined the working. Three forces braided together along her ribs into something that should not have been wieldable.

The storm faltered.

Vinea hissed.

He didn't press the attack. He used the moment. He twisted in mid-air and went into a fissure in the plane, the shadows taking him. Balmo, ever practical, darted past Idonea and went after him, vanishing into the void's edge.

The plain was quieter than it should've been.

Nellith stepped out of the shadow behind her. Her smile was calm.

"There you are," she said. Her voice cut through the after-storm chaos. "I knew you would find it, eventually."

The blood ran down her arms. She couldn't stop it. The magic within her hadn't finished rising.

"This ends now," she said.

Nellith tilted her head. "You think so?"

"He doesn't intend to leave me whole, mother."

Nellith stilled. A breath. The proud smile didn't slip, exactly, but it adjusted.

"He told you what you wanted to hear." Idonea pressed forward. "That I would survive what crossed through me. That I would be transformed, not consumed. He never meant it. He agreed to it because the agreement kept you working. He's done this before. To the witch in the village. To whoever

was building before her. He uses women who think they are partners. You are the last in a long row, mother, and he hasn't told you that either."

Nellith's mouth opened, then closed. For the first time, Nellith looked uncertain.

"*Don't.*" Her voice was sharp now. "Don't speak to me of what he has told me."

The shadows at her fingertips flickered. They didn't weaken; they hardened. Her body had decided what her mouth hadn't yet caught up to.

Shadows erupted from her fingertips. They struck the ground around Idonea, carving trenches through the stone.

Idonea staggered but held her ground. The magic in her arms had a weight now it hadn't had before.

"You could stand beside me," Nellith said. The surrounding shadows swelled. "Finish opening that relic. You feel the power waiting, don't you?"

Lightning cracked overhead.

She stood in a quiet field. Sunlight warmed her face. She blinked.

Nellith stood a few steps away, dressed not in shadows but in the simple dress Idonea remembered from childhood.

Nellith smiled gently. A genuine smile. The one she'd worn when Idonea was afraid.

"Do you remember this?" she asked.

The garden of their home in Draugaros. Where Nellith had once taught her how to shape the Current.

"You were so afraid at first," Nellith said, drifting towards her. "And now look at you."

Nellith reached out, brushed a strand of hair from Idonea's face with gentle fingers.

"You've become extraordinary."

Tears rose unbidden. "This isn't real," she whispered.

Nellith's eyes softened. "Of course it's real. I am your mother."

The illusion cracked, and the daemon plane flickered back into existence. Lysander lying injured behind her.

Idonea closed her eyes.

When she opened them again, her mother stood before her once more, cloaked in shadow.

Idonea raised her blood-streaked hands. They trembled. Everything in her trembled.

"I—" She couldn't get the word out. Her throat closed.

Nellith waited.

"You knew that." Her voice was hoarse. "You knew I did. You used it."

"Yes."

"Then this is your fault. Not mine."

Idonea unleashed the magic. The surge of Current and Eitr tore through the storm. It struck Nellith full in the chest, the impact blasting shadows apart.

Nellith screamed.

Lance dove from above, hissing towards Nellith.

She fell to one knee.

Idonea stumbled forward, the power still pouring from her hands.

Nellith looked up at her. In that instant, time stretched: Idonea saw the mother she'd loved, feared, and loathed all at once, faltering.

She forced the magic forward. "Because you left me no choice."

The power surged one final time.

Nellith's body dissolved into shadow and ash, her final scream swallowed by the raging storm.

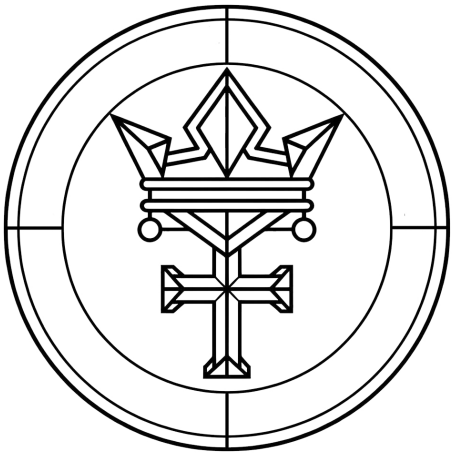
The wind died. Lightning faded, and the daemon plane fell silent.

Idonea collapsed to her knees. Lance slithered near her, butting his head into her side. Her hand found him, the warm weight of him under her palm settling her pulse. She had once thought she didn't particularly like him. She had been wrong about that.

The place where her mother stood was empty.

Idonea stood up.

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Chapter 39

The relic still pulsed against her palm. She no longer wanted its call. Its rhythm was a heartbeat that was not hers, slow and patient, and every beat was a soft pull to take what it offered.

The daemon plane was beginning to unravel. Cracks spider-webbed through the molten ground.

Idonea swayed, her legs threatening to give out beneath her. Every muscle trembled from exhaustion, her lungs burning with each inhale.

Across the shattered plain, Lysander still laid where the lightning had struck him.

Lance circled low through the dimming storm, his long body weaving through drifting ash. The Iaculus gave a soft hiss as he passed overhead, wings stirring the brittle air.

Idonea forced herself forward. The relic throbbed again. She ignored it.

Instead, she reached for her blade. She cut a fresh cut across her forearm.

The daemon plane drank greedily, the blood vanishing between cracks in the stone.

Idonea closed her eyes. She centred herself, letting all three powers meld into one. It still rubbed uneasily against her skin, the potent mix, but she let in gather.

Knelt at Lysander's side, she pressed her palm against his chest. Idonea refused to let him succumb to his injuries.

Lysander's jaw clenched. A low curse slipped between his teeth.

"Idonea—"

"I know." Her voice trembled, but her focus didn't break.

Lysander gasped as the final surge of the power faded away.

A shiver of triumph, sharp and fragile, ran through her.

“Idonea…” he said. His eyes, wide and alert, searched hers. “What have you done?”

She looked away. “What I had to.”

The portal hung before them, an unstable tear in the air itself, crackling with chaotic energy. She had to close it. Had to destroy the relic.

Her palms were slick with her own blood, a reminder of the cost, and the pulse of Current around her hummed like a living thing. She could feel the weight of the daemon plane pressing in, twisting reality in sharp, unnatural angles.

Then, she sensed him: Vinea.

He emerged from the darkness like a nightmare made flesh. The serpent in his grasp lifted its head and hissed.

"You will hand that relic to me." Vinea's voice hissed, echoing with a thousand voices at once.

Lysander pushed himself upright beside Idonea. Steel rasped as he raised his blade. But his mechanical arm hung useless at his side.

"We end this now," she said.

Vinea laughed, a sound like thunder rolling over broken cliffs. "You cannot end me, little witch. You can only *return* me. And the way back is the way I came. Through what your mother built into your spine."

The marks on her back flared.

All five at once. Not warm: hot, the way iron held too long in fire becomes hot. Each one a separate line of pain running from the base of her neck to her back. She could feel the shape of every mark from the inside. Five years' worth of working laid into her flesh. They were *singing*. They had been singing since she crossed the threshold into the Nexis, and she'd not been listening.

They were the door. The relic in her hand was the key.

And Vinea was the one who'd always meant to walk through.

She understood it in a single breath. Her mother hadn't made her into a crucible but into a *threshold* — the crucible was a story Nellith had told herself to bear what she was doing. The truth was simpler: the marks on Idonea's spine were the door Vinea needed, and the relic was what unlocked it. She had carried the relic into the Nexis and brought the door with her, and Vinea had been waiting for this exact moment for as long as Nellith had been making her.

"No," Idonea said.

Vinea's grin widened.

"Yes. You have nowhere to go, little witch. The marks are mine. The relic is mine. And the body? Mine."

She lifted the relic.

Lysander staggered forward. "Idonea—"

"Stay back." Her voice came out hoarse. "Whatever happens. Stay back."

Lance flared his wings overhead, screeching, but he too didn't approach.

She reached behind herself and pressed the relic against her back, where the fifth mark sat. The tattoo nearest the surface, the least settled. The most recently opened.

The contact was an animal sound. Something inside her made it. She didn't know if she'd spoken or if her body had spoken without her.

Her spine arched. The five marks burned in sequence, each line of fire travelling up her back faster than the last. By the fifth she couldn't tell where the marks ended and her bones began. Her spine was being unmade along the marks her mother had drawn.

Vinea began to laugh. Then he stopped laughing.

"What are you doing?"

She didn't answer. She drew her blade.

She didn't strike at Vinea. She didn't strike at the daemon plane. She struck at the relic pressed against her own spine. The blade met the relic through the her own back. It stabbed through her skin and stopped against the relic's surface. She drove it in further.

The relic split and opened against her spine. Her dragon-blood, all of it, rose to meet what was inside.

For one moment she was not separate from the relic. The witchwyrm's heart, ancient beyond her, pulsed once against her own pulse. She felt, for one impossible breath, the dragon whose heart this had been, long before her line had been distilled down from the dragons into women with marks on their backs.

The relic recognised her and let go.

The split in its surface opened all the way. A gold-like liquid substance poured out of the relic into the marks on her spine and through the marks and out into the daemon plane behind her.

Vinea screamed.

The scream was not what Idonea had expected. Vinea didn't lunge for he couldn't. The marks on Idonea's back, having received the relic's contents, were closing. One by one in the order they had been opened, but in reverse. Each one sealing took a piece of Vinea's substance with it. He was being woven back into the Nexis along the lines that had been meant to bring him out.

The lion-form lost its mass. The serpent in his hand dissolved into smoke. The thousand voices in his voice became one voice, then half a voice, then no voice. The last thing she saw of him was the shape of his eyes, and then nothing.

The marks on her spine sealed shut.

The relic, what was left of it, fell from her back to the stone with a sound like a coin dropping. A husk of gold with nothing left in it.

The daemon plane shuddered. Cracks ran in every direction and the light dimmed. Above her, Lance shrieked from very far away.

Her legs wouldn't let her stand.

Idonea didn't to speak; she wouldn't have been able.

She had been the door. She had unmade the door. The marks on her back were silent. She hadn't known how loud they had been until they stopped. The silence settled wrong, then grew stranger still. For the first time in years there was nothing beneath her thoughts that didn't belong to her.

She fell forward onto her hands.

Lysander was beside her before she'd fully fallen. He caught her shoulders. He didn't say anything. He held her up.

The blade was still in her back. He took the handle gently and pulled it out. The wound bled, but he didn't feel it; her body had spent its capacity for pain on the marks.

Lance landed on the stone beside them. He pressed his head against her hand. She breathed out, and let him.

She managed a sound that was both a laugh, and not, and turned her face into Lysander's shoulder. There was only the sound of their breathing.

Lysander’s hand found hers, gripping tightly. “We made it.”

“Yes." Her voice was hoarse.

Lance coiled near her feet.

She drew a ragged breath, letting her head fall forward. "I've killed my mother, Lysander. I had to kill her." Her voice didn't break. The crying part

of it had been used up in the marks. "And I've unmade what she made of me. I don't know yet if those were the same act. I think they may have been."

His hand tightened around hers, grounding her.

Idonea’s throat burned. The weight of that truth settled on her chest like a stone. Every memory of Nellith, the warmth of her mother’s voice in her earliest childhood, it all collided with the raw necessity of the act she'd just committed. Her hands shook as she pressed them against her temples, trying to still the storm in her mind.

“I feel…” she said, for she didn’t truly know. She closed her eyes.

Lance gave a soft hiss.

“I don’t know if I can ever forgive myself,” she said, looking up at Lysander.

His jaw flexed, eyes flicking to her lips for a fraction of a second before returning to her eyes. “There is nothing to forgive.”

She inched forward, enough to let her forehead brush against his.

Lysander’s hand cradled the back of her neck gently, thumbs brushing over her skin.

Emboldened by the proximity, she closed the space between them, pressing her lips to his in a soft kiss.

Lysander responded immediately, his hand moving to her waist, holding her close. The kiss deepened. Then, they broke apart, breaths mixing, hearts pounding in unison.

Lysander leaned back a fraction, brushing a finger along her jaw. “Are you okay?”

Idonea shook her head, still resting against him, a soft chuckle escaping. “Ask me tomorrow.”

Idonea drew a quiet breath, letting herself pull back just enough to meet his gaze. “I need to see Alcaeus.”

She looked at him properly for the first time since the lightning had struck. The branching dark lines she'd seen on his chest in the Nexis hadn't faded with the crossing. They ran from his collarbone to his left hip in a pattern like frozen lightning, and where the mechanical arm joined his shoulder the brass had transferred the strike into flesh. A burn that was deeper than surface, she could tell by the way he held himself, the slight forward lean that meant his heart was working harder than it should.

"Stop," she said.

"Idonea—"

"I can feel your heartbeat from here. It is wrong."

He didn't argue, and she knelt beside him. Her palm was already slick. She pressed it to the skin above his sternum, directly over the burned branching lines.

She reached through the Current, the way Kitsa had taught her to reach. She found the double-beat where there should've been one, a gap where there should've been none. She worked around it, feeding warmth into the burned tissue, steadying the rhythm.

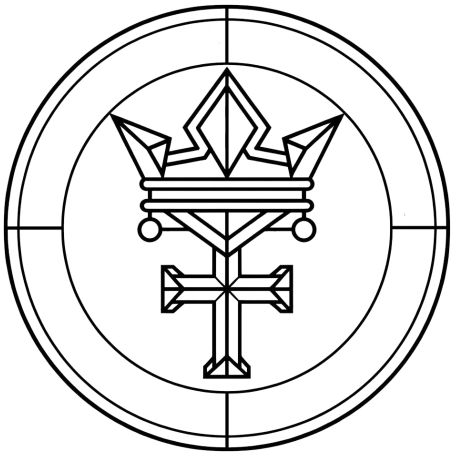
The branching lines faded to pink. His breathing evened.

When she lifted her hand, he caught her wrist. "You are running out of blood to spend."

"But you know what I must do," she said, and helped him to his feet.

With a final, lingering glance at the shattered relic, Idonea rose, letting Lysander help steady her.

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Chapter 40

Though weakened, Idonea wouldn’t wait any longer. She had to save Alcaeus.

She hoped she wasn’t too late.

When they reached the chapel above, the pews were as they had left them. The village beyond the chapel doors was still.

Idonea stood at the threshold.

"Alcaeus first," she said. "Then Lidiya."

But Lysander didn't move towards the door.

She turned and looked at him. He was standing in the centre of the nave. His good hand was at his side. The mechanical arm hung at his other side, dead and blackened, the brass fused in places where the lightning had run through it. He hadn't tried to use it since the strike. His coat hung wrong on him because the shoulder of the brass arm was no longer holding the line of it. He was lopsided in a way he'd not been since she'd met him.

He was looking at her. Not at her wound, or her hands. At her face.

"Lysander."

"Give me a moment." His voice was very low.

She waited.

He stood breathed. The breaths were not even.

"I thought —" he began, and stopped.

"I know."

"Idonea, I thought —"

"I know, Lysander."

He closed his eyes.

She crossed the nave to him. She walked, slow and uneven, across the cold stone floor until she was standing in front of him, and then she lifted her good hand and laid it against the side of his face.

He didn't move into her hand. He didn't move away from it. He let it sit there.

"I'm here." He didn't answer. "Lysander. I came back."

"I know."

"Look at me. *I came back.*"

"I'm looking."

"You're not."

A breath. He opened his eyes.

Up close she saw what the lightning had done to his face, fine burns along the line of his jaw where the brass arm had transferred the strike, burns that would heal into nothing if attended to and into scars if not. There was dried blood at his temple.

"I lost the arm."

"I know."

"And I am no longer of the Order."

"I know that too."

"Idonea." His voice broke for the first time since she'd met him. "I don't know what I am."

She moved her hand from his face to the back of his neck and drew him down until his forehead rested against hers.

"You're mine," she said.

He didn't answer. Some tension left his shoulders. His thumb moved against the small of her back, over the youngest mark.

"Lysander."

"I heard you."

"Say something."

"I don't have the words for it yet."

"Then don't have them." She kissed him, lightly, on the mouth. He let her kiss him. He stayed there with his eyes closed.

After a while she said, "Alcaeus first."

"Yes."

"Then we will find you something to do with your hands."

A short, broken laugh against her mouth. "Witchling."

"I am serious."

"I know."

He kissed her, then, briefly.

Lysander let her go alone into the hospice.

Alcaeus’ flesh was pallid, and he barely could open his eyes.

“I’m here,” Idonea said, taking his hand in hers.

His eyes struggled and a smile slid over his face. “My daughter.”

She rolled her shoulders before she crossed to him. The marks along her spine pulled when she stretched. They had stopped burning at some point. They hadn't stopped being there. The scarring was thicker than the inking had ever been. She would, she thought, carry the texture for the rest of her life.

She’d already shed a lot of blood. Her hand trembled as she hovered her dagger over her palm. Her eyes slid over his withering frame. She gritted her teeth and sliced the palm open.

To cure a daemon’s poisoning, she knew she risked exposure for possession, for a direct path to the Nexis was needed. But she’d faced Vinea and survived.

Idonea knew she could do it.

She pressed her palm against his throat and closed her eyes. She pushed passed the Current and tapped into the Eitr that leaked through the Nexis. It was fluid, but fragile. She had to coax it, connect with it, putting all those Resonance lessons into practice.

Idonea called to it and submerged her consciousness after it. Second by second, she forced the Eitr up through the connection. She pushed it into Alcaeus, seeking out the poison, drawing it out and cleansing it.

Her eyes opened to the blood coating his neck and staining the white pillow a sickly red. But it was working.

Colour bloomed up and down from his neck. His complexion returning, his heartbeat strengthening.

Tears welled in her eyes. He’d be okay. Relief hit hard. She hadn't known how tightly she'd been holding that fear.

She sat down in the chair at his bedside and waited.

“Idonea?” Alcaeus said.

She startled from the chair. “I’m here.”

He reached up and tucked a loose strand of hair behind her ears.

“You saved me.”

Idonea smiled. “I said I would.”

His knuckles brushed down her jawline. “And you’re still here. Still in one piece.”

Idonea glanced down at herself, at her bloodied and dirty self. “In a manner.”

She picked up the glass of water on the bedside table and handed it over. He took a large gulp.

“Is it over?” He sat up.

Idonea looked away. “Yes.”

He squeezed her shoulder. “What happened?”

She took a shaky breath. “Nellith is dead. I…”

Alcaeus shook his head. “It is okay. And?”

"She told me, before she died, that I was a *crucible*. That she'd made me into one. The strongest of her daughters. The one who would survive the working."

He waited.

"It wasn't true. I was a *threshold*. The marks on my back were a door for Vinea to cross. Mother was telling herself a story about me to bear what she was doing. The story was wrong."

Alcaeus closed his eyes briefly.

"I had suspected something of the kind. I couldn't have said the word *threshold*. I am sorry, Idonea. I should've understood sooner. I should've taken you when I took Dyota."

"You couldn't have. I was too old."

"You were not too old. I was too tired."

A silence between them.

"I unmade it," she said. "The door. I closed the marks down. They are scars now. I will carry the lines, but the working is broken. He cannot use me. He cannot use anyone he might have used after me."

"And the relic?"

"Empty. There is a husk of gold somewhere in the Nexis."

Alcaeus exhaled. The exhale was long and shaky. He'd been holding the breath for too long.

"Thank you," he said.

"For what."

"For doing what I could not." Praise and grief tangled in his words, indistinguishable.

She looked away. "Well…" Idonea walked him through everything that had happened with the Templars, pirates and witches.

He gave a heavy sigh. “I am not sure how to salvage that.”

Idonea shrugged. “You were incapacitated. Technically, you’re innocent.”

He swung his legs over the edge of the bed. “I guess I will let the Brothers out once you leave.”

"You cannot stay here after that," Idonea said.

He looked at her.

"The Grand Templar will walk out of that terrace house and send a message south before nightfall. The High Hierophant will have a Republic execution squad in the northern pass within a fortnight. You defied both of them publicly. A Brother who stood against the Grand Templar, whose daughter destroyed a Republic official's escort and freed a cohort of witches —" She shook her head. "They will not forgive it."

Alcaeus was quiet, then he nodded. "Rusegrad might be nice." He looked at his hands, which were still faintly trembling. "It wouldn't be the first time I have started over."

"Take Lidiya," Idonea said. "She will not survive here with only the Templars."

The set of his jaw loosened by a fraction. "Yes. All right."

“Lysander and I…” Idonea said. “He can’t be in the Order anymore.”

Alcaeus rubbed at his brow. “No, of course.”

“But…” Idonea began and steadied herself. “I am not leaving the Republic. Dyota must be saved.”

He closed his eyes.

“What do you think they will do to her, because of me?”

His gaze fell on her. “That will be no easy task.”

Idonea smiled. “We’ll see.” She bent and kissed his forehead. “She needs her sister. And you need more rest.”

She paused at the doorway, glancing back. Alcaeus’ chest rose with strength it hadn't known for weeks. He would live.

She didn't go straight to Lysander.

The Magistrate's house was on the way. She hadn't decided whether to stop. Her feet decided for her.

He answered the door himself. He looked smaller than he'd two weeks ago, the silver in his hair gone white. He took her in without speaking. He didn't look surprised to see her.

"Brother Alcaeus' daughter."

"Yes."

"You have something to tell me." His voice was hollow, as though he already knew, as though he'd been waiting weeks for someone to arrive at his door with exactly this look in their eyes.

Idonea swallowed against the tightness in her throat. "I do."

He stepped aside to let her in, but she didn't cross the threshold. Some part of her, the part that had carried this knowledge through snow and blood and the daemon plane itself, knew that what she was about to say would shatter him. And she wouldn't deliver that blow from inside his home.

She drew a steadying breath. The cold wind tugged at her cloak.

"Your wife killed eleven witches in the two winters you have been here. She built a working in the chapel basement out of their teeth. She did it for the daemon she'd been serving since she was young. She didn't know I had found it. She tried to kill me in the cottage. She was killed in the woods by my familiar. The Templars buried her body, somewhere."

The Magistrate didn't speak for a long time. His hand on the doorframe whitened, then loosened.

"I didn't know."

"I believe you," Idonea said.

"I should have."

Idonea looked at him. She knew that sentence, she'd been carrying versions of it for years.

"What do I do with this," he said, and the words were not really a question.

"I cannot tell you. I have my own to carry. You will find what you find."

He nodded. He looked past her, at nothing.

"Thank you, witch."

"You're welcome, Magistrate."

She turned and walked on.

Lidiya's cottage was three doors down. The shutters were closed. Smoke rose thin from the chimney.

She didn't need to knock. Lidiya was at the door already.

"It is done?" Lidiya asked.

"Done."

Lidiya stepped aside to let her in. She didn't pour tea. There was no time for tea, and they both knew it.

"I told Alcaeus to take you east," she said.

Lidiya's mouth curved. "I thought you might."

"Will you go?"

Lidiya looked at the bare floorboards. "There is nothing left here for me to guard," she said at last. "Yes. I will go."

At the door, she touched Idonea's sleeve. "Find your sister."

"I will." Idonea went out into the cold.

Lysander waited outside, his eyes fixed on her with that steady, unreadable calm. Lance flew in the skies above, enjoying the freedom of not having to hide.

“How is he?” Lysander asked when she neared.

“Healed,” she said, and flexed her wounded palm.

Lysander studied her hand, then her face. “And yet you’ll keep giving until there’s nothing left.”

She stepped past him. “If I must. Dyota waits.”

"You mean to go to the Reform College?"

Idonea nodded. "I will tear that place apart."

He reached her side. They walked side by side, their silence thick but not uncomfortable.

She asked, voice low, “Do you regret it? Siding with me over the Order?”

He gave a dry huff of breath. “I regret nothing.”

That pulled her gaze to his. Lysander leaned down and brushed his lips across her cheek. "But let us bathe before we travel again."

She looked at him. He still bled from somewhere near his collar.

"Yes," she said. "Bathe first."

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Daemon Hierarchy



1. **Sovereigns**: Personification of primal forces.
2. **Archdukes**: Grand concepts. Rules provinces within the daemon plane.
3. **Dukes**: Manifest in half etheric/half corporeal forms. Inhabit prepared vessels.
4. **Lesser Nobles**: Can physically manifest for a limited time.
5. **Thralls, Shades, Imps**: Cluster around rifts in the Nexis.
6. **Wraiths**: Unstable residues of the Nexis. Appear as silhouettes of smoke. Shadows bend towards them. Useful spies.

Daemons need an anchor in the human plane.

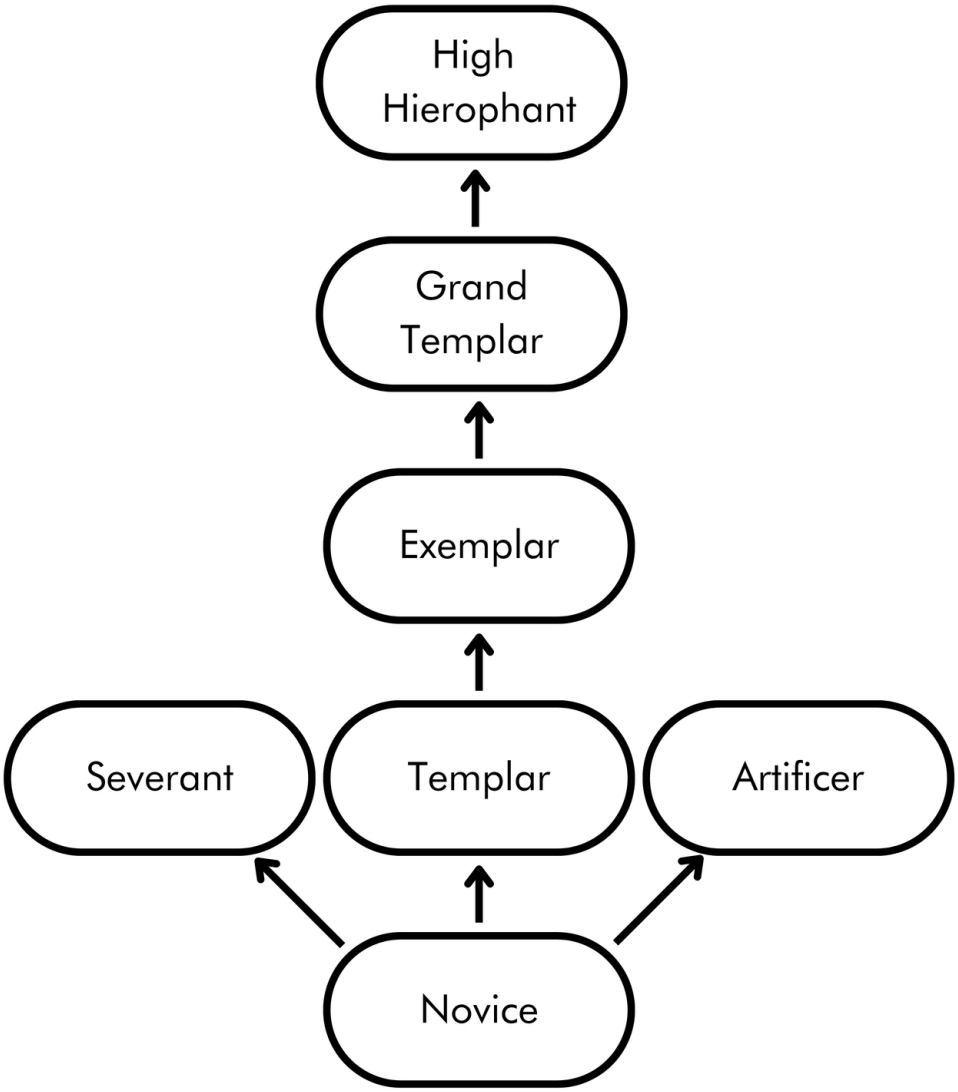
A daemon sigil acts as a key. Can be used as a temporary stabilising anchor, no matter how high the daemon sits on the hierarchy.

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Order of the Radiant Dawn



From Shadow, Light. From Light, Order.



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Photo by Alise Black Studios

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