
The Beautiful Ruin Series | Book One
VEX ASHBOURNE
THE SMILING DARK

The Smiling Dark

The Beautiful Ruin Series


Book 1

There is no greater agony than bearing an untold story inside you.

— Maya Angelou

Vex Adkoune

OceanofPDF.com



Copyright © 2026 by Vex Ashbourne

All rights reserved.

No portion of this book may be reproduced in any form without written permission from the publisher or author, except as permitted by U.S. copyright law.

This work is hand crafted by a human author. No generative AI was used in the writing of this text. This work may not be used to train artificial intelligence systems without the express written permission of the author.

The characters and events in this book are fictitious.

Thank you for purchasing an authorized edition of this book and for complying with copyright laws by not reproducing, scanning, uploading, or distributing this book or any part of it without permission. If you would like permission to use material from the book, please contact vexashbourne@gmail.com.

No portion of this book may be reproduced in any form without written permission from the publisher or author, except as permitted by U.S. copyright law.

Character Art: Natalie Parker

OceanofPDF.com

A Note Before You Begin

This story doesn't shy away from the dark. It sits in it, sometimes for longer than feels comfortable, because I believe some kinds of pain deserve to be seen in full— not softened, not rushed past.

If you know what it's like to have your whole world tilt sideways in an instant. To go from fine to unrecognizable between one breath and the next, you already understand something this book is trying to say. That the after is disorienting. That peace doesn't return all at once, it comes back in pieces, quiet and uneven, and some days it doesn't come back at all. That healing isn't a straight line, and surviving something doesn't mean you owe anyone a graceful recovery.

If you're still looking for your version of peace, I hope you find it. Not the performed kind— the real kind. Messy, hard-won, entirely yours.

This book was written for the readers who need their fiction to hold the weight of real things. I wrote it with care, and I'm asking you to read it the same way… gently, at whatever pace protects your own heart.



Author's Note

This book started as fantasy. It didn't stay that way for long.

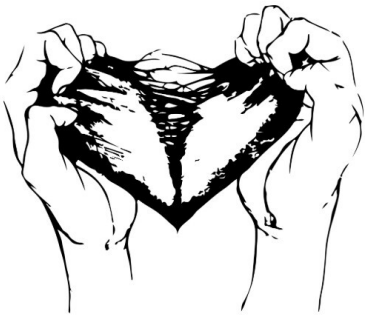
Rynn's story is not a memoir. I changed the shape of nearly everything and wrapped it in dragons and magic and a world that never existed. But this isn't only a book about how certain kinds of pain feel. It's a book about

things that actually happened to me. A sister I lost. Twins I have spent years learning to protect, sometimes past the point anyone around me understood why. A body that still panics near water. Violence I lived through with my children beside me, far from home, that I've tried to write my way through rather than around. Homes I was not safe in, more than once, at the hands of people who were supposed to keep me safe.

I did not write this so you could guess which parts are true. I wrote it because turning something real into fantasy was the only way I knew how to survive looking at it long enough to finish the book.

Some of it is dramatized. All the emotion is real.

OceanofPDF.com



Content Warnings

This book contains mature themes intended for adult readers:

References to child endangerment and death
Physical abuse
Discussion of past self harm
Sexual content
References to trading one's body for survival/food
Referencing a pregnancy loss
Referencing past self harming scars
Death of friends/loved ones (implied rather than explicit)
Parental and foster-care-related abuse

Reader discretion is advised. Please take care of yourself.

OceanofPDF.com

Dedication

Jessica Lynn
1996 – 2000
You are loved and missed, baby sister.

To every woman who has felt controlled. Who has been backed into a corner with no clear way out, smiling on the outside while something inside her was quietly suffocating. Who has been called too loud, too sensitive, too much, by people who only ever wanted her small. Who was never chosen, never protected, back when protecting her should have been someone else's job — so she built the walls herself, wore the armor before she even understood what it was for, and learned to love herself because for a long time, she was certain no one else would.

This book was written for you.

I hope it makes you feel seen in the parts of yourself you've never said out loud. I hope it reminds you that surviving is not the same as disappearing, and that you are not alone in this. Not for one more day. And I hope you know, whether or not anyone ever showed you before — you were always worth choosing. You were always worth protecting. You still are.

OceanofPDF.com

Glossary

According to Rynn

Nobody asked me to write this. Someone decided you needed a guide to the realm before jumping in, and apparently my particular brand of unbothered honesty made me the right woman for the job. Lucky you.



Adara Face paint, if you want to be reductive about it. I don't. It's armor, the kind that doesn't need a blacksmith or coin, just the willingness to be looked at and not flinch. Wear it before you walk into a room that wants to eat you alive.

Aeryndel One of two kingdoms, out of six, where you can be a witch, a shaman, or just a person without magic and not get killed for it by law. Two. Out of six. Sit with that before you get too impressed with how civilized this realm likes to pretend it is.

Alaric (A-lar-ik) Don't ask me to explain him. I'm still working on that myself.

Cadryn (Cad-er-in) Home. Ruled by King Kuyprus. Red rock desert, the best sunsets, and humans kept conveniently out of sight near the coast so no

one in the royal ward has to think too hard about who actually built the roads they walk on.

Drenoch The kingdom that decided slavery was the best way to rule. Enslaves anyone who isn't Woken, or any Woken who steps out of line. My parents ran from it with four daughters and nothing else. I'd tell you it gets better after that, but you've read this far, so you already know I'd be lying.

Humans No magic, no title, no power in a system built to keep it that way. It makes them hungry for someone smaller to control instead. I learned that young. Kept in their own ward here in Cadryn, tucked far enough away that the royal ward never has to smell where its comfort actually comes from.

Korreth (Kor-ith) North. Cold. Ruled by King Maerek.

Kuyprus (Ky-prus) Rules Cadryn. Again, my home. He loves reminding everyone how much he "honors" me, the Touched, while making sure I never forget who signs for my jewelry.

Nidmeh (Nid-may) A girl

Nox My dragon, over three hundred years old, allegedly wise, mildly insufferable. Don't tell him I said any of that.

Rynn (Rin) Me. You're welcome.

Shamans (Self-made) Nobody's born a shaman. You build it, apparently, through ritual and discipline and however much of yourself you're willing to carve away to make room for it. They don't care if you're good or bad. They care what you're willing to pay. Ask one for help and be ready to hand over a memory whether you like it or not.

Solenne (Sole-een) A party the crown throws in my name whether I want one or not, because apparently celebrating me is easier than governing well. Solennes were created just for me. Free wine, forced smiles, and expensive dresses all paid for by the king. These parties are literally every fucking week.

Touched Born of witches. Apparently so rare there are no books about the Touched. Marked before I even understood what the mark meant, bonded to a dragon at birth (apparently).

Witches (Born) Real magic, using elements of the realm, which is exactly why kings have spent centuries trying to own it. There are endless possibilities in it. Not good or evil on its own. Give the wrong person enough grief and desperation, though, and that same magic will happily

help them become something worse. I've seen it happen. I try not to think about how easily it could've been me.

Woken The self-appointed ruling class, because nothing says legitimate authority like naming yourselves after being "awake" while the rest of us were apparently sleepwalking. Born with exactly one trick each, wind or fire or whatever flavor they got handed, and somehow that's enough to run six kingdoms. Ego, dressed up as biology. Nox told me they're fae, or at least called that a long ass time ago.

OceanofPDF.com

PROLOGUE

Rynn

I am running by the time I reach the human ward, the bread and twist of dried meat crushed against my ribs, where I've been clutching them for far too many blocks. Calla hasn't eaten since yesterday morning. Eleven silver left in the pouch at my hip, all I have until the week turns over, but the coin doesn’t mean half as much as this meat.

The alley behind the grain house is the fastest way through, narrower than I remember. Or I am wider now, broader through the shoulders than the girl who used to slip through it sideways without touching either wall.

A man steps out of the doorway before I reach the other end. Big through the chest, smaller through the eyes. He doesn't give a shit that I have somewhere to be. Decides my night is his to interrupt.

Some nights, when a wood pallet in whatever dark corner I find feels colder than usual, I let a stranger's hands do what they want to trade an hour of my body for a roof. I don't have an hour tonight.

His hand closes on my wrist. I don't slow down long enough to consider him at all.

"Not tonight," I say as I pull free and keep racing towards Calla.

I hear Calla before I even reach her door. Not words exactly, but a muffled sound, the kind that doesn't need speech to mean help.

I don't remember crossing the last of the alley or the door giving way under my shoulder. I am frozen in place and instantly, I see red. A roar builds in my chest like a lion drawing breath before it unleashes a fury that shatters the air. I see the grotesque shape of a man wrenching Calla up by

the arm and his other hand clamps hard over her mouth to choke off the sound of her cry, dragging her toward the bedroom door. Someone finally noticed her the wrong way.

The main room is small enough that I can smell the sweat on the back of his hairy neck. Calla's eyes find mine over his shoulder. I go for the dagger at my hip, dulled from years of use, but a blade all the same. My eyes narrow and I am all animal ready to shred him where he stands, but as I step toward him, a paralyzing pain hits. Not his. Mine.

It starts at my spine, low, where the skin has always felt like scar tissue that never quite finished healing. It splits. An old seam giving way after being sewn shut for eighteen years, stitch by agonizing stitch. My birthmark. It rips open and expands. There is a burning sensation that’s traveling up my spine that climbs over both shoulders, and when it meets itself at my collarbone, the light bursts out of me all at once, blinding and searing white light that is somehow larger than my own body. I feel every inch of this space as if I am everywhere and nowhere. My mind stays on Calla through all of it. *Protect her.*

His grip disappears off her and he is engulfed in flames. His deep voice erupts in a piercing scream as Calla backs up against the wall, her tear streaked eyes glazed over from the shock. The brilliant amber flames stay isolated on him alone, not even licking the floor beneath his feet. My eyes narrow and I stand firm as my entire focus shifts to kill the threat. *Protect Calla*.

The door is off its hinges behind me. Somewhere in my peripheral I sense a crowd has formed and people are starting to look in, but I can't pull my gaze from this disgusting being before me as he drops to his knees and slams face down on the ground.

The light under my skin dims, fading slowly from a searing white to a cool icy blue, across my skin like embers losing heat. The man has burned completely to a blackened corpse on the floor. The stench of charred human flesh overwhelms my senses, and I have no memory of causing any of this. I haven't even moved. I no longer have the dagger in my hand. It's lying on the ground at my feet, but I don't remember having dropped it.

Calla is alive. Shaking, silent, pressed into the corner, attempting to make herself invisible. Alive. The human kids living here now appear in the hall not daring to step foot in the main room. *She is all that matters right now.*

I drop to my knees and press both palms flat against the floor as I try to remember how to breathe. My heart thunders against my chest, causing the world to spin around me. I’m still glued to the floor as if my soul is still trying to fit back into my body. The ground under me begins to shake, so hard that it rattles window shutters on homes three streets over and knocks jars off shelves, and somehow, impossibly, it doesn't stop there. Even at the heart of the kingdom, a day and a half's ride away, the palace feels it. The king's feet buckle as the floor shudders beneath him. Nobody mistakes that for an earthquake. Not with light still bleeding out over the rooftops of the human ward, even as it fades from my skin.

Somewhere outside the door, screaming starts. Then more of it, spreading through the human ward the way water spreads down a slope, finding every nook and ditch all at once. The earth stops moving but pieces of the mud-brick ceiling continue to break off, coating everything in dust. I try to force myself up to move but the new, fresh openings along my spine burn like someone has cut holes out of my skin like pin-pricks. I crawl to Calla, past the shirt that burned off me during whatever the hell that was, to cover her from anything that might fall. I don't feel the rocks pushing into my knees as I slide across the gravel floor of this hut. Calla was forced to live here with several other human kids that no one wants responsibility for. In Cadryn’s human ward, past age twelve, if you don't have a family, you're on your own. Calla has been here 3 years.

I drag myself around the burned corpse, the smell of his burned flesh hangs in the air. I push past him and pull Calla into my lap. It doesn't matter that she is fifteen and more woman than most at this age, right now, she needs her big sister, her protector. I squeeze her tight and whisper, "It's you and me against the world Calla, you are safe." She doesn't respond, just pulls in closer to my neck not caring my chest is bare.

We are a pile on the floor, giving anyone at the door a clear line into the hut. They see a corpse charred, lit with crimson embers and the two of us huddled together. One of us glowing from beneath her skin. They are pointing and gasping, some are angry, yelling for the Watch to come. I don’t think it's my tits they’re gasping about. I spit at the carcass, *fucker messed with the wrong girl*.

Taking this moment to hold Calla, I feel I can breathe easier now. The initial searing pain across my skin as it ruptured has dissipated. Now, I feel strong. Free. Stronger than the witch I thought I was. The pressure that's

always sat at the base of my skull feels released and I can fill my lungs full of air for the first time in my life.

I'm coming.

The voice is not mine. It is not anyone I have ever heard, low and enormous, threaded through with something that sounds like pain. It’s inside my head the way my own thoughts are, no distance between us at all.

I don't answer it. I don't know how. I hit my head back against the wall we are sitting against and shake in an attempt to get this voice out of my mind. But the voice comes again, hardened yet underlined with panic. I can feel it like my own emotion but it's separated somehow. A distinct thread I can grab onto.

I'm coming. Hold on. I'm coming.

OceanofPDF.com



CHAPTER ONE

Rynn

When I look in the mirror, I hardly recognize the girl who once fought and begged for everything she had. She's not in the reflection anymore, but she's still there, right beneath the surface, ready the second survival calls for her again. Eight years isn't long enough to forget the pieces of myself that had to die for me to keep going.

The carriage stops outside the Aldenmere Estate, and I take a steady breath before putting on the mask that shields this world from the woman beneath the surface. Or is it her I'm trying to shield from them? I can't tell anymore. Every week a different royal Woken family gets the great honor of hosting the Solenne. It's disgusting how much money they throw to make their Solennes bigger and better than the last.

I am not blind to the King forcing these celebrations to *honor* me as the Touched. Making all the Realm believe Cadryn is the best of the best Kingdom because I happen to be living here. Its purpose these last several years has become more about the competition of who can flaunt more of their riches.

As I walk down the desert gravel path lined with exotic cacti and agave, I hear the sound of water before I see it. Though my pulse begins to quicken, the drumming of my heart pounding in my ears, my mask does not break. The doors open and the last of the day's heat rolls in with me, dry and close, the kind that sits on your skin like a second layer. By the time I get through the massive home and reach the bottom of the wide sandstone steps, it finds me. Somewhere below, the inescapable sound of children in water.

It hits me like a boulder dropped on my chest and my jaw clenches.

The Aldenmere Solenne drew every titled family in the royal ward within a day's ride, and they have all come dressed to prove it. Gold everywhere. On throats and wrists and temples, catching the last hard light of the Cadryn sun the same way the red rock catches the sun, like it was made for exactly this. Chains draped across hips over sheer fabric that moved with the desert air. Jewels pressed on necks, faces, along jaw lines and brow bones in careful arrangements that took hours and were meant to look like they had not.

I moved through the Solenne in a dark cream and gold dress. One that King Kuyprus has given me, which isn’t saying much considering all my things are from the royal palace. Not being allowed to work because the King had scoffed, '*A Touched should never sully their hands with work*.' Bullshit gilded cage, dressed up as an honor. It's not like I had a whole eleven years of surviving, fending for myself, before Gael found me on his order when my power broke out and shook the realm. My hands were plenty sullied by then. Nobody asked.

My dress blends in with the desert as most Woken do. Since I knew everyone would stare at me anyways, why not embrace it and wear my fancy jewels? I had learned a long time ago that I could not enter a room without the room knowing it. Not because of the gold or the dresses but something louder than that. Something that moved around me and rearranged the air before I arrived. Before my power exposed itself, I knew how to stay hidden, unseen when I wanted to but since becoming the Touched, blending is something I've had to relearn, choosing every word and every move I make planned and deliberate. Now people mistake my stillness for docility... submission.

The women wear their hair loose or braided through with gold thread, their faces painted in unique adara designs. Geometric lines, dots, and swirls in black, white, and copper with charcoal pressed deep at the lash line. The men were no different. This was the royal ward. Restraint was for kingdoms that could not afford better.

My dress has a deep V in the back and front, held together only by thin straps at my shoulders. In the front, it drops to just before my navel. In the back, it drops to just above the base of my spine, low enough that my mark is visible to anyone who cares to look. Nobody in Cadryn has ever needed an explanation for it. They know it's what separates us.

The fabric, sheer in layers over a fitted underlining, gold detailing sewn into every panel in patterns that catch and release the light with each step. A split to the thigh. My hair loose down my back with a single braid along the crown threaded with tiny amber stones. Gold cuffs at my upper arms, stacked bangles on my left wrist. A long chain from my throat to my sternum and another that dropped further. I look like the desert had dressed me itself. I need them to see exactly that and nothing else. A Solenne. The Woken's preferred excuse to wear their wealth on their skin and call it culture. Underneath the laughter and the clinking of glasses and that usual hum of a crowd who had never once in their lives worried about tomorrow, my attention is on finding the water.

The Aldenmere estate is built into the mountainside the way all the great houses of Cadryn are built. Level by level, carved into the red rock, each terrace dropping to the next, in a wide sandstone step edged with iron and desert jasmine climbing every wall it could reach. At this hour the stone held the warmth of the day in a way the air no longer did. The sun is dropping behind the western ridge now, pulling the sky with it. The light had gone from white to gold to the kind of pink that looks almost violent against the sand that Cadryn does better than anywhere else in the six kingdoms. People stop their conversations for it without realizing, caught in a collective hold of breath that occurs while the sky bleeds. I did not stop. I venture further along the upper terrace, following the sound. Stone steps descended to the next level and then the next, each one opening to a wider view of the valley falling away below, the desert floor distant and rust-colored in the dying light.

And there, on the lowest terrace, framed by sandstone and iron and the enormous darkening sky, the pool. Not visible from the estate’s first level, wide water, light scattering and catching across it as the children moved through it. At the far end, the water spills silently over a wide ledge down into a lower basin, even more private, tucked below the sight line of the second level. Beautiful. The most beautiful thing here and I can not look at it directly.

There are several children in the water. Boys and girls, splashing and chasing each other. One child is sitting alone on the wide stone steps at the pool's edge. One more dangling his feet over the side, sandals discarded behind him. Up on the terrace above, two parents stand, deep in conversation, drinks in hand, glancing down occasionally. *Occasionally*.

Too trusting. I smile and nod as they both turn my way. Idiots, both of them, watching their kids the way you watch a fire you've decided won't spread. I think it hard enough that it reaches Nox. He huffs in agreement, which from him is basically a standing ovation. Being bonded to the only dragon anyone has seen in over 500 years is a shock to most but since Nox found me after eighteen years of searching, he has become one of the main reasons I could learn to build my mask. I had not known what it was to be protected, to feel seen and loved, until him. His presence releases the tension in my neck.

I am not a security blanket.

Get out of my head and focus.

I am over three hundred years old, Rynn. I am more than capable of doing two things at once.

I normally would have a retort but now is not the time to get into it with him. Six children. I sip my wine. Nobody sees me count them. Nobody ever does.

I navigate the males here with practiced ease. Lord Dessin flirts a few steps away, tracing the tip of a young woman's pointed ear until she giggles and leans into it. I keep conversations light, focused on them instead of me, playing stupid and flustered every time one of these men tries to touch me, court me, charm me into a corner. Five turned down so far, and I'm only on my second glass of wine.

“Lady Rynn.” Lord Klvir, third son of some house I never found reason to remember, appears at my elbow. He holds his glass up, “To the most beautiful woman in Cadryn, as always.” “You are too kind.” I touch my glass to his and smile, thinking he is possibly the dumbest man I have had the displeasure of nodding at tonight, and that is a genuinely competitive field. “What a perfect evening Lady Aldenmere has given us.” He continues to talk but I've already stopped listening. I stopped caring a long time ago. Two years to be exact, since Gael passed and all anyone did was give me pitying smiles and awkward condolences and the worst was their concern about our twins growing up without their father. Gael was loved by all, being one of the highest stations in the Kingdom but fuck these Woken trash thinking I needed their opinions on raising my kids alone. Thank the stars they have since moved on from those harrowing questions and now it’s as if every male in the realm is looking to get in my bed. What an honor it would be to fuck the Touched.

I smile warmly at Klvir, which makes his cheeks turn red and his smile widens a little more. His nose hair extends out of his nostrils making me gag internally. I have no idea what Lord Klvir says next because across the terrace, past the lords and ladies arranged in their careful clusters of importance, the pool catches the last of the light.

Tavon is at the east fountain; Nox's voice moves through the bond like a hand placed between my shoulder blades. Steady. Present.

Lyra is with him. They are arguing about a fish.

Something in my chest released so completely I almost feel it physically but through our bond I know he feels my breath hold involuntarily.

Of course they are. I thought back.

The fish is singular. Tavon is correct.

You cannot possibly know that. I mentally roll my eyes at Nox. The pause he sent back manages to convey, without a single word, that he was not like the small minded Woken and had observed considerably more fish than I had and his assessment should not be questioned.

I have them and the water. *You can breathe.* He doesn’t need me to explain because he has seen my past as if he lived it himself when we bonded eight years ago. I don't like being told what to do but in this case, I listen. He can always feel that wire pulling tight inside me, preventing me from moving, breathing, thinking. His instruction helps me release it, just slightly, just enough to focus. I take a sip of wine.

On the lowest terrace, Nox has settled himself with the stillness of a creature that had survived centuries by making others adjust to him rather than the other way around. He is too enormous for these walls or ledges. He just exists on the lower terrace. His body fills that lower space entirely. His head rises naturally to the level of the terrace above, and I can see his black scales with a hint of auburn. He looks like he’s against the burning sky, his eyes moving across the water with an attention that mirrors my own. Two of Lady Aldenmere's guards quietly relocate themselves to the opposite side of the terrace. Three lords find reasons to move their conversations several feet further up the steps. None of them would say it was because of Nox. They would say they wanted a better view of the sunset. They would say they heard the food was better on the other side. They would say anything except the truth, which is that when the most feared dragon in the realm settles himself beside you, you simply find somewhere else to be. Nobody questions why he chose that spot. Nobody questions Nox.

The sky above the western ridge has gone from amber to something deeper now, a bruised orange at the horizon bleeding up into violet, the first stars beginning to push through at the edges of the dark. This is what Cadryn is known for across the six kingdoms. Not its armies or its treaties or its politics. Its sky. The way the desert holds the color long after other kingdoms have gone dark. People came from Solvaeth and Aeryndel just to watch the sun go down over the red rock and witness the open endless stars in the dark that follow. I grew up under it and still it pulls me toward it.

There, on the far wall, I catch the eyes of a large man with a warrior's stance. Still not drinking. Still failing at whatever it is he came here to do. This is the third time my attention's been drawn to him. Round ears. Not Woken, then, since every Woken-blooded soul in this room wears theirs sharpened to a point like a badge of rank.

But he's not just some witch's son either. I can feel that off him from clear across the room, something pressing low and constant against my senses that has nothing to do with wine or nerves. It isn't Touched. I'd know that instantly. Whatever he is, I don't have a word for it.

There's something almost funny about it, a man that size trying to go unnoticed. He might as well have tried to hide Nox behind a rock face. His hair's pulled back in a top knot, a few strands braided the way it's done here, though maybe elsewhere too, for all I know. His beard's dark and full, trimmed close and clean against skin a deep, sun-worn brown.

I've spent most of my life certain I was a witch too, so I know better than most how wrong a person can be about their own blood, let alone someone else's.

The children, Nox pushes through the bond. His voice shifted slightly. Not alarm, but something adjacent to attention that has my spine going rigid.

They are moving toward the pool. There are older boys with them.

I scan the terrace casually, soft smile in place. I see Tavon first, then Lyra, and then the group of boys moving with them toward the stone steps leading down to the pool. A pressure sits on my chest.

How much older? I send back.

Difficult to say. Several years perhaps.

I watch them for a moment. Tavon is laughing at something. Lyra has her careful eyes on the steps. The older boys are moving easily and relaxed.

Tavon's friends from his lessons were supposed to come today, I murmur, more to myself than to Nox. *They're close in age.*

Nox is old and the only children he is around are mine. The difference between 6 years old and 12 years old may be hard for him to determine. From my sightline, I can't tell if they are the kids from his lessons but Tavon is laughing, and Lyra is there. I know my children and their skill; they know how to swim. I had stood in that water every single lesson with my hands under their backs until they no longer needed them. They also knew the rules and would not go in the water without me.

I return my eyes to Lord Klvir and ask another question that gets him to continue to talk about himself. I smile and nod along to his response when it happens.

I would not be able to explain how I knew before I heard it, only that Tavon's laugh stopped. Not trailing off. Not interrupted by something ordinary. It stopped the way sounds stop when something has gone wrong, and the world rearranges itself into before and after in the space between one breath and the next. Then the splash. I’m already moving. I do not decide to move. My body makes that decision without consulting me.

I knew it. He will be fine. I repeat over and over as I speed through the gravel faster than eyes can track, faster than anyone could fathom a woman who has been drinking and smiling at rose options twenty seconds ago could do. My heart is beating so hard it’s pulsing behind my eyes creating black spots in my vision. I widen my eyes to sharpen on the water and force down the panic trying to build.

Behind me I hear the Solenne shift. An intake of breath a crowd makes when something has gone wrong and nobody yet knows what. But I am not looking behind me. I am at the pool steps. Down them in three strides. The glass is gone from my hand— I do not know where but I am at the water's edge where Tavon is in the water and there is a boy on top of him. Bigger, older, and the weight of him is driving Tavon down. Tavon's face is below the surface. I go in. No thought. No hesitation. No removing my sandals or my chains or the dagger strapped beneath my skirt that the court of Cadryn has never once had reason to know about.

I plunge in completely, grabbing Tavon by the back of his collar. I hold the other boy by the arm with my other hand while lifting them both simultaneously. I come up with Tavon who is coughing, crying, then coughing again. I hold him against my chest with one hand on the back of

his head, saying something to him. I do not know what. I can’t hear my own voice. There is a sound in my ears like the whole world has gone underwater with me while he coughs it out. The light in the water is glowing white with whatever is moving through my chest as it reaches my eyes. I feel it… the amber and red catching through the dark the way they do when my control slips.

I release the other boy who is sputtering at the pool's edge. Already his face is arranging itself into something of innocence. His eyes move to the other boys on the steps with a slight smile, then back to the adults above. “I was trying to help him,” he gasps, feigning surprise. “We both tripped in.” What a little liar. We lock eyes for exactly two seconds while I decide whether it is worth the scene, or let it go because Tavon needs me more than this boy needs to be humiliated in front of his friends. He looks away.

Nox’s roar shakes the ground and the water pulses at the vibrations. The older boy falls back on his rear staring in wide eyed fear of the massive black dragon who is now inches away.

I saw, Nox said through the bond. Very quiet. Very still. He is deciding whether to eat the boy or not.

Don’t. I say down our bond to stop whatever action Nox might take against the other boy.

I should have— Nox’s anger pushes hard through the bond and I have to block out his emotion to get control of my own.

No. I told you they were friends. That is on me.

Rynn—

He is breathing, I take a moment to internalize that. *I have him.*

Nox takes a step back and pulls his head up snarling with his teeth bare as if it's physically painful for him not to end that boy and the crowd takes a staggering step back on the higher level.

Tavon's coughing has slowed. His hands are fisted in my soaked dress and his face is pressed against my neck. I can feel every breath his tiny chest takes against my skin, which is the only thing in the world that matters right now. Above me on the terrace, the Solenne has arranged itself at the pool's edge. Lords and ladies peer down with their expressions of concern that cost them nothing, hands pressed to chests, eyes wide, already composing the story they will tell at the next Solenne. As I get closer to the pool's edge, a cat appears, sitting there as if waiting for me and I see two birds land on a bush nearby. I pay them no mind but when I finally look up,

dripping and still holding Tavon, his weight solid and breathing against me, I see him. The warrior man from the far wall.

He has not arranged himself with the crowd at the pool's edge the way everyone else has. He is standing slightly apart, the way he’s been since he arrived. Still holding the glass he has never drunk from. Looking at me. Not at Tavon. Not at the pool. Not at the spectacle of Cadryn's most adored lady dripping in cream and gold with my dagger hilt now visible through the soaked fabric. At me. His expression does not change. He doesn’t feign the concern the lords and ladies above are performing. He stands there with stillness not belonging to a man at a Solenne. Looking at me with intensity that raises the air on my neck. Filing. Cataloguing. Notating.

I recognize the behavior immediately because I invented it. He notes the dagger, I watch him note it, and neither of us so much as blinks. He probably noted how fast I had moved, my children… how I hold Tavon, my sweet Lyra with me at the pool's edge.

That won't do. A man that is careless with his staring won't live long enough to regret it. He's not half as practiced at hiding his thoughts as I am, and my children are about to disappear from whatever list he's keeping entirely.

Two can play at that game. I don't allow my children to hold anyone's attention like that. I'll see to it personally. This man is not here by accident. I do not know yet what he is. But I know what he is doing because I have been doing it my entire life. He is building a picture of me.

I wrap my arm around Tavon and press my lips to the top of his wet head while my other hand is holding Lyra’s at the pool's edge above me, rubbing soothing circles with my thumb while she crouches on her knees, wide-eyed and shaking, tears already down her face. His twin, the only witness, the one who saw everything and could do nothing. Her small hand is trembling as I kiss it. I let her pull me toward the steps, and I climb out of the pool without taking my eyes off the large man with the piercing stare. He holds my gaze without flinching. Most people look away eventually.

Find out everything, I urge Nox.

Who he is. Where he came from. Who sent him.

OceanofPDF.com

CHAPTER TWO

Rynn

Bessa arrives before first light the way she always does on Tuesdays. No knock. She has a key and she uses it quietly while I am waiting, already dressed and waiting in the dark of the front room when the door opens. We don't speak. We never need to when she comes to watch her grandbabies. We grip each other's forearms and touch our foreheads together, her soft wrinkled skin smells of the clove oil I made her.

"Is the oil helping the pain in your jaw?" I ask quietly, so as not to wake the twins.

"Yes, my dear. I told you that wasn't necessary, though. I was planning to go to the med-witch next week when Afilo gets his coin from this month's hearth coin." I understand the Woken feel superior to those with different ears than them, but to give their own elderly such a small amount each month that they can't even see a med-witch without saving coin for months is beyond me.

"I have more than I know what to do with. My mother was a witch, remember? I did get some knowledge before she died. Plus we are family. Whatever you need just say the word, don't hesitate."

"That you did, dear, and she would be so proud of you. Thank you." Her voice is gentle and cracked with age. I lean down so she can reach the top of my head, and leaves me with a small kiss on my cheek. She moves around me to head toward the kitchen to start breakfast as I leave out the back of the house.

My estate is smaller than most of what's built along this stretch of the mountain, and that was deliberate. The king offered me anything standing empty in the royal ward, whichever great house I wanted to prove Cadryn valued me properly, and I took the plainer one at the western edge instead. Half the ward assumed I didn't understand what I was turning down. I understood exactly what I was turning down. I wanted the sunset. And after it, the stars. Always the stars.

Every other estate along this ridge lights itself up after dark the way pride requires, lanterns and gold spilling into the sky until half the stars wash out before midnight even without the moon's help. Mine sits turned west, away from all of it, nothing between my own yard and the horizon but red rock and open air. From the wall I watch the sun go down clean, and after it, the kind of black sky nobody else on this mountain can actually see anymore, because they built their own light straight into the way of it. Some nights I lie outside on the gravel floor and imagine myself swimming amongst the stars, completely consumed by all of it, and for those few minutes I feel whole.

I already trained out back an hour before Bessa arrived. The city was still fully dark while my children were breathing in the even rhythm of deep sleep. I had been in the yard moving through the forms Helen taught me. Not for discipline. Not for peace. Because the body requires maintenance the way any tool does and I learned early on, that a body you could not rely on, is more dangerous than having no weapon at all. She was the fifth and final home to take me and my sister in before I turned fifteen. Old enough to fend for myself. She was brutal but at least she kept Calla until she was considered "old enough" by human ward standards.

The wilderness opens up immediately behind the property, the mountain terrain rising above the last line of royal ward homes in red rock and dry scrub and the pale nothing of early morning sky starts to peek through. No path for the first hundred yards. Just rock in the low desert brush and the sound of my own footsteps on packed earth and I take in a full breath at the stillness around me. I know every inch of it. Two years of Tuesday mornings had made sure of that. The ridge path begins where the terrain levels briefly before climbing down again, a narrow line worn into the rock by feet that had been walking it long before mine. Wide enough for one person. Too tight for carriages, too rough for court shoes, too far from the

ward for anyone who valued their appearance to bother with before noon. Which is exactly why I use it.

By the time I crest the rise, my own roof is already gone behind me, the last of the royal ward swallowed by the climb down. I stop. The valley spreads below me in the pale gold of early morning, the desert floor distant and rust-colored, the mountain range cutting the horizon in both directions.

The city is built into the mountain rather than beside it, climbing the slope instead of spreading flat. Down where the mountain finally gives up and levels into open desert, the common ward sits pressed into the mouth of the pass between the two ridges, the only door in or out on this side of the city. The royal ward climbs the red rock above it in wide sweeping terraces of estates, mine among them, each one facing the valley the way every royal ward home is positioned to do. And higher still, where the mountain narrows toward its point, the castle sits over everything like a crown someone forgot to take off.

Saguaros stand scattered up the whole slope of this mountain. Above me the sky is doing what the Cadryn sky does best, holding the last of the night at its edges while the light pushes in from the east in long flat bands of amber and rose. No walls. No ceiling. No one requires anything from my face. I stand here for a moment and breathe. The low desert brush along the path turns slightly in my direction reaching for my ankles the way it has since I was small enough to think it was just wind.

Nox is already waiting. Not physically. He is somewhere above, riding the thermals that rise off the warming rock, his presence moving through the bond with a quality that tells me he has been awake all night and has things to report. I feel it before he says anything.

You found something, I nudge for him to start talking.

Several things. I start walking and let him talk.

The storm magic he brings up first. He circled the Aldenmere estate twice in the dark last night while everyone was enjoying the Solenne. He came back with the same answer each time.

His name is Alaric. The man carries a storm the way the other Woken carry their elements, yes, but this is wrong. Woken power has a quality— Nox tries to describe the power as if it has boundaries that only he could sense.

It lives inside a person and has edges. What came off this man has no edges, Nox pauses as if to find the right words.

It moves through him and beyond him without asking permission, the way a real storm does not stop at a wall because a wall is there. It simply goes through. I cannot shake the chills that run up my spine at Nox's description.

I had grown up watching the Woken arrange themselves in careful hierarchies at every Solenne, fire above wind above stone, each one certain their element was the measure of all things. Nox explains that there is no Woken he's witnessed that has ever smelled like him.

I have never heard of a power like a storm. Air, yes, but storm?

There is something in his blood that is older than Woken. Something that does not come from inheritance the way Woken power does and it is also not a gift passed down a bloodline but rather the bloodline itself. Like the storm is not something he carries, it is something he is made from.

I keep walking. The morning air is cool against my face, and the rock beneath my boots is solid on my hike down. I focus on both of these things while I turn what he is saying over.

What does that mean, I ask.

It means, Nox is careful with his words, *that whoever his parents were, one or both of them are not Woken*.

A shaman, maybe? I offer. My father used to speak of them like that. Old. Hidden well enough that most of the realm forgot to be afraid of them.

No. Nox says, *Shaman ability is not blood. It is a calling. An initiation. Something learned or awakened in a person, not passed down through one. Whatever this is, he was born with it already.*

Well his ears are round, and he has a specific power neither of us has witnessed in another Woken before, I reason. *He is taller too, thicker built than the Woken men ever run. The only other option is a male witch, except they don't carry a specific power like that.*

Witches have their own energy, I would have picked it up the moment he got close. He doesn't have that either.

My body moves on instinct, missing the cacti and loose rock while I try to come up with an answer.

And then there is the other thing. Nox's tone shifts when he continues. I feel the disgust he is holding back while he pushes his thoughts to me through the bond.

There is something else in his blood. Something else underneath all of it, I feel his hesitation and uncertainty pushing through.

Something was put there. I can smell the difference between what a person is born with and what has been done to them and this, he pauses and I feel his mind working to find the explanation, *this was done to him. It is not like any magic I know from nature. It's like something was taken and replaced from where it belonged and used in a way it was never meant to be used. It sits in his blood like a scar. Like something that did not heal because it was never meant to heal. It was meant to hold.*

My father had told me once, when I was very small and not yet old enough to understand what I was being warned about, that there were witches who crossed lines that could not be uncrossed. Dark magic. The kind that used blood as a mechanism. Used not to ask for something from the old powers of earth but to take. To reach inside a living person and rearrange what was there without their consent and bind it to another will entirely. Strip a person's choices from them at the root and replace them with someone else's. Forcing others to do your bidding.

It is illegal across all six kingdoms without exception. Not because the kings had agreed on much between them, but on this one thing, every ruler in the six kingdoms has looked at what dark magic could do to a person and arrived at the same answer.

No. Because it could not be undone without destroying the person it had been done to.

There is one more thing. Nox's voice shifted slightly. Hesitantly.

Oh my stars Nox, I don't think I can take much more. Should I get a parchment and take notes?

If he could roll his eyes he would. *His eyes are wrong. Not wrong in the way of illness or damage. Wrong in the way of origin. A piercing blue through most of the iris but there is also a ring of glowing gold around the pupil that does not come from any Woken bloodline I have encountered in three hundred years.*

I stop walking. This is all way too many variables, and considering how he was staring at me yesterday with such intensity, I must keep him from finding out anything about me. Is he a puppet? Who is pulling his strings?

This feels like the longest hike down I’ve ever taken. The valley below is beginning to catch the morning light, the rust-colored desert floor going gold at the edges. The ward I’m headed to is waking. I can hear it faintly, the first sounds of the common ward starting its day.

Every Tuesday, once Bessa has the twins, I walk the ridge, which takes me further from home but straight into the common market. I could shop at the royal market instead. Every Woken merchant in that ward would trip over his own robes for my coin but I prefer the common market. It doesn't matter where I go. All of Cadryn gets the same mask of poise, elegance, and the pleasantly content Rynn, because that is what the Touched is supposed to look like. Grateful.

Heads turn no matter where I go, but the common ward feels... easier. People there are too busy actually working for a living to want a performance out of me, unlike the royal ward's Woken, who expect one with every glance, all fighting over who gets to talk to me first.

The royal ward has one kind of beautiful, gold and polished and identical house to house, everyone competing over whose flowers cost more. Everything there is fine and expensive and says nothing at all. The common ward has the real thing. An old man near the eastern gate paints portraits straight onto scrap wood with three brushes and whatever pigment he can grind that week, and I have stood in front of his stall more mornings than I would ever admit, just watching his hand move like the painting already exists somewhere and he's only finding it. Grandmothers sell bread and stew straight out of their own kitchens, recipes nobody bothered writing down because nobody needed to, carpets woven in patterns that cost someone a whole winter, spices stacked into little paper cones that smell like an actual home instead of a merchant's idea of one. Every single thing sold there was made by the hand selling it, and that means something to me I have never been able to explain to anyone who grew up with money already in the family.

Past the stalls, where the market gives way to actual homes, the old residential blocks still sit behind their own walls, thick red stone put up generations ago back when this side of the ward worried about needing defending, and nobody living now remembers exactly from what. Bessa and Afilo live behind one of those walls, in the house they raised their son in before the Ranks took him.

The registered witches and Woken both, side by side, make up the common ward’s people who can't afford the royal ward's prices, everyone there selling whatever their hands are good at because the month's rent does not care what you are. Woken bother me plenty, I won't pretend otherwise, but that's the royal ward talking. All that prissy self-righteousness dressed

up as breeding. It was never the Woken. It's the ones with too much and too little to do with it.

The witches settle something in me I don't examine too closely but there is an ease standing near them anyway, something under my ribs loosening half a degree. Calla is two hours north and I get to her when I can, which is never often enough, and standing in a market full of women who move like her, talk like her, smell of the same herbs she keeps drying over her own hearth, is its own particular ache.

There was a witch here once, years back, selling river stones out of a basket because her rent was due and her usual trade had gone quiet that season. Bond stones, she called them. Split a stone clean in half with the right blood and the right ash worked into it, and each half knows the other, warms in your hand when the person holding its twin is thinking of you hard enough. I paid her for the working, not the stone itself. I already had my own stone in mind, and my own blood to put in it, and ash from the one thing of my parents' I still had left to burn.

I gave Calla her half of it the same week I gave her enough silver to disappear completely. Told her not to send word, not even a raven, until enough time had passed that no one could trace it back to either of us. She did not ask how I knew it would work. She never asks how I know things. She just closed her fingers around it like it was already warm.

I do not let myself sit in that morning long. I pull my eyes back to the valley and shake it off. The common ward is still a good walk off yet, and Nox is still waiting on an answer.

Blood magic was used on him, I muse.

Yes.

Whoever did it had to have known this unknown bloodline of his before they did it. I tell Nox because you would have to know what you were binding. You would have to know what you were trying to hold down.

Nox does not answer immediately. When he does his voice is careful.

Yes, he finally answers. *Whoever did this knows exactly what he is*.

Something about that sits wrong in a way I can not immediately name. I am not concerned for this stranger but cautious. Something more like the recognition of a kind of cruelty in someone who looks at another person and sees only their usefulness.

The frustration of it sits worse than it should have. It's the night ride... last night, I think to myself. The sky had been enormous and the things pressing

on me from the ground had been very small and very far away, and now that I am back on the ground, the gap between that height and this ground feels enormous and unfair, and I woke up already irritable.

I push it down and keep hiking down.

I slow my steps, hearing them.

Three Woken from the common ward. They've positioned themselves badly even for an open ridge. One is crouched behind a boulder to my right, his boot and the line of his shoulder visible at the path's edge. One to my left has pressed himself into the shadow of a rock outcropping, his breathing loud enough to hear from ten feet away. And one ahead on the path who is not hiding at all. He is leaning against the rock face with his arms crossed and his legs wide, the posture of a man who has already decided how this morning is going to go. A small knife turning lazily between his fingers, picking his teeth with it, his eyes are half-lidded and slow, moving over me the moment I come into view. The kind of look that is not attraction but possession, already dividing me into parts and deciding what he wants to do with each one. His shirt is unlaced to the chest and stained from the night before. His jaw is slack, lips slightly parted, the looseness of a man still half drunk who has mistaken that looseness for confidence. He smiles when he sees me notice him. Like it's a game and I am already losing.

I continue walking toward the man, past the two who think they are hiding now behind me. The morning wind shifts and I catch it. Alcohol. Stale and sharp, the smell of a night that had not yet become a morning for them. They have not planned this carefully.

I stop walking as the one ahead pushes off the rock face and starts toward me. Behind me I hear the other two step out onto the path. The way men do when they think numbers are the same thing as power.

They had felt me before they saw me. They always do. Now with little distance between us I see the moment of unease cross his face, trying to make connections. Some animal part of them assessing me as a potential threat or prey. It doesn’t take but a half second for this male to decide, straightening up taller, gaze narrowing in on me with a hint of a smirk. He has no idea that he made the wrong choice.

I tilt my head slightly.

Somewhere above, I feel a familiar shift through the bond. Vast and unhurried, the same subtlety as weather changing before a storm. Not

concerned but more like attention narrowing to a point.

I got it. I tell him through the thin thread of warmth that lives between my ribs.

I know. He responds.

The warmth settles but does not leave. It never leaves.

"Lost, sweetheart?" the one now standing in front of me says as his eyes move over me like he has already decided my body belongs to him. He reaches out lifting the end of one of my curls, turning it over in his fingers like he is inspecting something he is considering purchasing.

I look at the curl. I look at his hand. I look at his face.

"Just passing through," I smile pleasantly.

He drops my hair. Tilts his head. Glances back at the other two.

The leader lifts the right side of his lips in a sly smile while nodding. His eyes move over me top to bottom and back up again, catching on things, lingering. The smell of last night's drinking rolls off him in the warming morning air, making me nauseous.

"Remember that girl from the village road?" He is not talking to me but to his friends as if I am no longer standing here. "Mouthy little thing. Thought she was going somewhere too." He laughs. Short and flat. "Nobody even came looking. Just another runaway, they said."

The one to my back left moves closer. Repositioning. Casual, like he just happens to drift that direction. I hear from the third one, on my right, where he is *safely anonymous*, a sound that is a mix of a mouse noise and a fish kissing water. Lips pursed. Aimed at the back of my head.

Is that supposed to be his kissy noise? Pathetic. I have heard more threatening sounds out of Calla's chickens.

The one in front grins back at him like he has just done something impressive. High bar, apparently. I keep my face pleasant with an innocent smile and try to step around him. I feel Nox through my chest pressing gently against my ribs. Patient, waiting, enormous.

Calm down. We don't need people asking questions if they hear you roar. I tell him. He huffs in agitation.

"Long walk for a woman alone, let alone the infamous Touched…" the leader steps in to block my path. "You should have someone with you. For protection." He's still smiling with missing teeth on the left side stained black on the rest. "Lucky you ran into us."

His hand finds my shoulder. The touch of a man who believes that putting his hand on something means he now owns it.

From behind me, the lip-smacking fuck makes the sound again. Closer this time.

I let three seconds pass.

"I would stop," I say sweetly. "If I were you." Narrowing my eyes on him, daring him to keep pushing me.

The leader's thumb moves against my shoulder. Testing. The small unhurried motion of someone who has never been stopped before and sees no reason to start now.

That mushy kiss noise is grating on my skull, I swear if he makes that sound one more time. Something in the back of my mind goes very quiet and very flat.

"Ah, come on honey, we just want a taste." He grips my shoulder hard. At the same time the two behind me rush forward.

That is their mistake. I start counting.

I drop straight down. Straight down on the hard rocky path, the rock cutting into my knees through my trousers. It surprises them all and the one gripping my shoulder so much that his hand is still reaching as I clear it. I have my dagger out before any of them understand what is happening. I slice through his wrist, severing the tendons, blood hitting the pale rock. I spin on my knees and stand before either man takes a step toward me.

The male is on his knees, cradling his hand to his chest. The other two are looking at him, waiting. The leader's face contorts in fury.

"Kill that bitch!"

The two remaining men face me. Lip-smacker is to my left and the loud-breather directly ahead. They look at each other for half a second.

That half second is theirs. The next forty-five are mine.

I take the loud breather first. He comes at me straight without strategy, just rage, arms wide and reaching. I wait until his weight is fully forward and committed. I cross my left foot over the right, dropping to one knee, and I slice behind his knee as he passes. He goes down hard. Power has nothing to do with size. I am faster.

One.

The lip-smacker is circling right while I handle the breather. Smart enough to wait. Not smart enough to anticipate. In a breath I have my dagger back in its sheath and as he lunges I am already moving. I spring up

using his own momentum, hooking my right arm around his throat and swinging myself onto his back. I grab my left forearm, creating a closed circle around his throat, driving my knee into his spine. I feel the sweat already accumulated between the fat folds of his neck. He stumbles forward under the sudden weight, hands grabbing at my arm, at nothing. He drops to the ground and stops struggling after a moment and goes very still but still breathing.

Two.

That leaves the leader.

Still on his knees. Cradling his wrist. His face moves through shock and lands somewhere dark and furious. He still has the small knife clutched in his good hand. He pushes himself to his feet unsteadily, the kind of pride that would rather die standing than survive on its knees.

He comes at me anyway. He swings wide and sloppy. I step inside it, driving my knee hard into his stomach. He doubles forward. I crouch next to him with a quiet smile, "You saw something to take but forgot to check if it wanted to be taken."

I slam the hilt of my dagger into his temple.

Forty-eight seconds. I counted. Not deliberately, more out of habit. Three drunk bastards and it only cost me forty-five seconds but the bar was low. I am aware my counting may be a tick that started a long time ago to hold onto the calm when the world becomes too loud. Numbers don't panic.

I straighten. The ridge is quiet again. The valley below catches the morning light, the rust-colored desert floor goes gold at the edges. Above me the sky is fully pale blue now, the last of the night completely gone.

Assessing the men, I know the first one is already gone. Bleeding out. The other two are still alive but I know they wouldn't talk. No one would believe the Touched could kick their half drunk asses let alone kill one.

I look at my dagger and send a silent kiss up to Gael for my blade. Forged in dragonfire and tempered with steel from the Dukmere smiths of the Ashen Peaks. A steel so rare it is sold only to those whose title and seal carry enough weight to open doors most people do not even know exist. Nearly indestructible. It has never once let me down.

The blade itself is dark as a starless sky, almost black, with that signature smoke-grey sheen that Dukmere steel carries. Like the metal remembered the fire it was born in. The spine of the blade is hollow, carved into sweeping dark wings that curve inward like something predatory mid-

strike. At its heart where the blade meets the hilt, a single burnt-orange jewel sits cradled in clawed iron, deep and glowing, like a dying ember that refuses to go out. The ridges of the setting fit my fingers like it was made for my grip alone.

Because it was.

The base of the hilt fans out into twin curves of blackened iron embedded with two rows of tiny diamonds set in a wave, because of course Gael added diamonds. He always knows me better than I let on. He knew I would carry something gorgeous into something brutal without a second thought.

I hear footsteps on the path behind me.

I have two seconds before I turn. I press my hand to my chest and widen my eyes as I turn around. I let my breath come fast and shallow, panicked.

Alaric steps onto the ridge.

He stops dead center in the path. I look straight into his blue eyes keeping my expression arranged into something that says I am shocked and nothing else happened whatsoever.

"Oh my," I gasp out slightly breathless. A soft almost-laugh. "That was a bit scary." I press my hand harder to my chest for emphasis. "Did you see that?" I move to walk up to him.

Alaric doesn't respond.

He is looking at me the same way he looked at me from the pool's edge. The same steady calculation, the same quality of attention that does not perform itself. His eyes move briefly, almost imperceptibly, to the path behind me. Then back to my face.

"Are you alright?" His tone is low and questioning.

"Oh I think so." I give another soft laugh and drop my hand from my chest.

Composing myself beautifully, "Goodness. I feel I have seen you before."

He pauses and raises his eyebrow at me as if to insinuate he sees right through me.

"Yes. At the Solenne last week. I believe it was the Aldenmere estate," he says slowly, lifting his gaze to look behind me deciding to go along with my game of *pretend we didn't stare each other down while I was dripping wet in the pool.*

I grab his gaze making my mask appear open and interested in him and it pulls his eyes back to mine. While holding his gaze, I turn around him,

hoping he will turn to walk with me back towards my home. More importantly, away from the men on the path, "How wonderful. That was quite an eventful evening. I am sorry I didn't get the chance to introduce myself. I am Lady Rynn." I smile at him warmly. The smile I give everyone.

"Alaric." There is amusement in his voice. "No title. Just Alaric." His eyes seem to narrow following me as I go around him. "Would you walk with me, just Alaric? I find I have had quite enough fresh air for one morning and would enjoy your company."

I do not wait for his answer as I start walking but see his face spark with humor.

He turns with me and follows as I keep my face forward and smile in place. I count my breaths. Steady, invisible, giving nothing away.

Well, how did I do? I relay toward Nox.

He saw everything. Nox's agitation causes goosebumps under my skin.

Great. I respond back. This should be fun.

The walk back is quiet but yet full of the words neither of us says out loud.

It hits somewhere around the second minute of it. Not fear, exactly, nothing so simple as that. My hands are already steady, my breathing already even, three men down on a red rock path with a dagger I barely had to raise before it was over. That part I know how to survive. What I do not know how to survive, apparently, is walking beside a stranger through empty desert with no one else around to perform for, my face still expected to hold the same pleasant nothing it holds at every Solenne, every market stall, every polite exchange I have ever faked my way through, except now there is nowhere to put the last hour. No audience to disappear the fear into. No crowd loud enough to drown out the sound in my own head of a knife cutting flesh ten minutes ago. Just him, and the quiet, and my own pulse still too fast under the smile.

Something in my chest starts to pull tight, the particular tightness that comes right before I either say something I will regret or simply stop being able to hold my own face together, and I hate that it's happening now, over nothing, over a walk. So I do the only thing I know how to do with it. I turn my attention outward instead of in. I make him the problem instead of my own lungs.

I let myself look at him now that there is no crowd to perform for, no audience keeping my eyes where they belong. He walks a half step behind and to my left, close enough to matter, far enough not to crowd me, the kind of distance a man learns on purpose rather than falls into by accident. The morning sun catches the dark hair pulled back at his crown, loose curls escaping at his temple and along his jaw where his beard is kept close and deliberate, not the careless kind of unshaven but the kind a man maintains because he has decided exactly how much of himself he wants visible. His shirt sits open at the collar, sleeves pushed to his forearms, and where the fabric gives I can see the edge of ink creeping up from somewhere lower, a line of something dark and old-looking disappearing again under linen before I can make sense of the shape. Whatever storm lives in his blood, it has left him built like something meant to survive weather. Shoulders too broad for the doorways in the common ward. Forearms corded with the kind of muscle that comes from use, not vanity.

He carries a short sword low on his hip, and two knives crossed at his back within easy reach of either hand. Nothing about the way he moves suggests he knows shit about merchant trading.

I catch myself cataloguing him, same as I would any threat. It works, some. It doesn't fix the tightness. It just gives it somewhere to point.

Nox must feel it before I can even name it myself, the thread in my chest pulled taut enough to hum, the distance between what my face is doing and what is happening underneath it stretching thinner than it should. Because the air changes before the sound does, a pressure drop I feel behind my sternum a full second before the wind hits. Alaric's hand goes to his sword on instinct. Then Nox is simply there, dropping out of the sky onto the path ahead of us with a force that sends dust rolling out in a ring. He folds his wings down slow and deliberate, every motion designed to be seen. He plants himself directly behind us.

Nobody asked him to come. I did not have to.

Alaric goes still, the composure of someone recalculating every assumption they walked in with.

"Company," Alaric says, recovering, a faint edge of humor forced into his voice. "He does like to make an entrance."

Go home, Nox says to me alone, low and certain, nothing playful in it at all. *You do not need him for the rest of this walk. You will never need him.*

I don't argue.

"I can take it from here," I tell Alaric, my voice pleasant, easy, giving him no reason to read anything into it. "Thank you for the escort."

He studies me a moment, something working behind those too-blue eyes, and then that half smile comes back, the one that has clearly worked on worse judgment than mine before. "Careful, Lady Rynn, people will start to think you have a protection dog." He tips his head toward Nox without quite looking at him, and steps in closer than the moment calls for, close enough that when he speaks again his voice drops low enough it is meant only for me, his breath warm against the shell of my ear. "Protection from what, I wonder."

I step back before I decide to. Put a full pace of air between us and turn to face him properly, chin level, nothing on my face but the same pleasant nothing I have been wearing all morning. "It was a lovely walk, Alaric. But Nox and I will manage from here."

Nox does not wait for an invitation.

The sound that comes out of him is not quite a growl, not yet, more the promise of one, low enough that I feel it in the ground before I hear it in the air. Then his lips draw back and I watch Alaric's eyes go to the teeth, each one longer than the man is tall, white and wet in the morning light, and whatever calculation Alaric was running dies somewhere behind his face. I have seen grown men's knees give out over less. Alaric does not run, I will give him that. But something in his spine finds a new kind of respect very quickly.

He bows. Deep and correct, the kind that costs a man something to give sincerely. "Lady Rynn." He straightens, inclines his head once more, this time toward Nox, and does not linger to see whether it was well received.

He turns and walks the other fork of the path without hurrying, the one that peels off toward the royal market instead of my door, hands loose at his sides, and after a few steps I hear him start to whistle, low and unbothered, like a man who has already decided this counts as a win.

The moment he's out of sight the mask doesn't so much fall as sag, just for a few seconds, my shoulders dropping half an inch, my breath finally reaching all the way to the bottom of my lungs.

Breathe. I have you.

A tear escapes without warning. My heart still is not used to being cared for this deeply.

Thank you.

You are mine, Rynn, forever. There is no thanking between us.

Several more tears fall but not from sadness, from the adrenaline releasing, from the mask falling. Even around Gael I needed a part mask but with Nox he could always see inside me. There was no hiding from him.



Lord Fennick's Solenne this evening draws the usual crowd of Woken nobility doing what Woken nobility does best, arranging themselves in expensive clothes and finding reasons to feel important. The royal ward estates are built for exactly this kind of evening, terraces lit by hanging lanterns as the sun moves down, the desert air finally releasing the day's heat, the sky going through its incredible array of colors the way it does only in Cadryn.

I arrive late enough to be noticed and early enough to still be useful. I have been at the Solenne perhaps twenty minutes, a glass in hand, receiving Lady Mira's very strong opinions about flower arrangements, and I listen with the expression of someone who finds this genuinely interesting, when Alaric appears.

He inserts himself smoothly into our conversation, picking up the conversation as if he had been here the whole time. I can not get my eyes off of his face. Observing the strong line of his jaw beneath a well-kept beard, and those bright blue eyes I have not yet been close enough to see clearly. His pupils are lined with deep gold rings. He redirects Lady Mira with a few sentences, and extracts me from her with the efficiency of someone who has done exactly this kind of thing many times before. Before I have time to wrap my head around what is happening, we are walking away from Lady Mira together.

I did not need rescuing.

He knew I did not need rescuing and did it anyway because it gave him an opening. He timed it perfectly. Someone had taught him this people handling maneuver or he had learned it through long practice on women like Lady Mira who apparently lose their footing the moment he looks at them directly.

I smile at Alaric and say thank you with just enough warmth that he would not know for certain whether he did me a favor or just annoyed me. Let him wonder.

I walk quietly with Alaric leading us to the drink canopy nodding to others as we walk, looking to get my attention.

"It seemed you needed some rescuing," Alaric starts. "I heard something about, *"you never put dahlias next to roses. They compete and then the whole arrangement suffers,"* and figured you could use a refill on your drink."

I laugh. Genuine enough that he can not tell whether it is. "Lady Mira feels very strongly about the subject. I owe you a debt."

"I will collect it sometime." His voice lowers and has an undertone of a growl. I turn over my shoulder to smile warmly at him and am struck by the slight smile and spark in his eye as his whole focus is on me. A chill works up my spine as his steady eyes penetrate my mask. It catches me briefly off guard. His words and his tone are pleasant but his eyes are something else entirely. It's as if I don't know what a confident man sounds like with how my body is reacting but maybe I don't. It's just a physical reaction. Snap out of it, I yell at myself.

"I look forward to it." I turn around to head back toward the gathering before he can try to read the flush on my face. He does not follow me back inside.

You forgot your drink. Nox says dryly entertained.

Stop eavesdropping! I just prefer the bartender inside. I scold.

He is good at this, saying one thing but meaning something entirely different underneath. I accept a glass from a passing tray attempting not to look obvious as I shoot it back in one gulp. He is very good at performing, the kind of good that comes from years of knowing exactly what people want to hear and saying it at precisely the right moment. It would have worked on almost anyone.

I am not almost anyone.

He is trying very hard to be close to you. Nox observes through the bond. *He is on the eastern tower, which puts him at an angle to see both the courtyard entrance and the main hall.*

I've noticed. I push back.

Two times today. He is positioning himself as useful.

I stay quiet.

You are not going to let him. Nox demands.

I have not needed anyone to be useful to me since I was eighteen years old. I snap back. *I didn't need it with Gael and I am not going to let someone with weird blood and possible dark magic in his blood near me or my children no matter how handsome.*

Handsome?

NO! I don't think he is handsome! He thinks he is handsome, or charming. It doesn't matter because he is not getting close.

I accept another glass and turn back to the Solenne and smile at someone whose name I cannot remember and do not care to. The mask I've spent years curating into a thing of peaceful content never slips.

OceanofPDF.com

CHAPTER THREE

Rynn

Bessa does not usually come on Wednesdays but of course she came. She arrives before the sun has fully cleared the eastern ridge with the same quiet she brings every time she stays with the twins. No questions. No raised eyebrow at the change in schedule. Just the key in the lock and her hand on my arm for one brief moment before she moves toward the children's room and I move to the back door.

Bessa and Afilo have been watching the twins for me consistently since Gael passed. They were good parents, and are even better grandparents to the twins. Bessa has a gentleness that never once curdled into softness, the kind of woman who could hold a screaming child for an hour without her arms ever once going tired, and Afilo has the patience of someone who spent years raising a son in the Ranks and came out the other side more careful with his heart, not less. Their son cost them plenty of sleepless nights, a soldier's life does that to the people who love him, but it never once made them harder toward what he left behind.

They are old, but not by Woken standards, somewhere past four hundred and thirty years each. Witches and Woken don’t mix but they have never once hesitated over what the twins are. Half Woken. Half something that isn't quite witch and isn't quite anything with a name, since having blood of the Touched isn't exactly hereditary, not that I've ever found that written down anywhere. So possibly half witch. Tavon and Lyra came out with round ears like mine, though if you look closely, close enough that most people never bother, the tips carry the faintest point, nowhere near sharp

enough to read as Woken, just enough to hint at the Woken blood running through their father's side. Tavon has my coloring. Lyra has Gael's eyes exactly, even the shape of them, and there are days I can't look directly at her without something in my chest closing up entirely.

Two years ago, on a Wednesday morning that started exactly like this one, is when their world changed. Our world changed.

Exactly like this. Same gray light easing through the kitchen window. Same quiet stretching out before the twins wake. It stops being a memory somewhere between one breath and the next, the morning folding back on itself until I am standing inside both of them at once.

We are sleeping when they come running in, small feet slapping against stone, both of them already laughing before they clear the doorway, and for one full second, before anything is wrong, I keep my eyes closed and just listen to them giggle. Our bed sits low to the floor so the twins are able to climb up easier.

"Wake up, wake up," Lyra shouts as she continues to run into our room still half asleep, as she pulls herself up on the bed where Gael is still sleeping, Tavon right behind her. Both of them climb up onto the blankets the way they do every single morning, throwing themselves against him like he's a mountain that's always going to catch them.

He doesn't catch them.

I feel it before I understand it, some wrongness in the room at his stillness. I slowly turn over, opening an eye and see Lyra and Tavon bouncing on him gently from their excitement, one inch from his face, poking his cheeks. "Daddy, the sun is up," Tavon whines. Then Lyra's laugh cuts off mid-note and Tavon goes very still on top of his father's chest, small hands pressed flat against him lifting themselves to look more fully at him. I open my eyes completely now and nudge him at the shoulder, "Hey." My voice is groggy from sleep and I notice he is still as a board. I'm moving before my mind finishes deciding to.

He's cold.

He's cold, and his eyes are closed, and there's nothing underneath my palm when I press it against his chest, no rise, no fall, no anything. I rip the blankets off fully to sit up, and push my fingers into his neck, checking. I don't remember screaming. I don't remember grabbing his shoulders, shaking him, slapping him, saying his name over and over like enough

repetition could undo whatever happened sometime in the dark while I slept three feet away.

Lyra's screaming too now, high and terrified, because I'm screaming I realize, because whatever's happening is big enough that her mother has stopped being the calm thing in the room, and Tavon's just frozen, small and silent, tears gathering in his wide frozen eyes, staring at his father's face like he can’t decide if this is a prank.

I can't stop shaking him. I know, somewhere distant, that I need to stop. The part of me that's coming apart can't hold thought except that this is not happening again.

After Bessa came, after the guard came, after they moved his body out of the house, I remember my children. I remember I am a mother, and I did the one thing I swore I would protect them against. The pain of your world flipping upside down in one heartbeat.

The moment they took their first breath I swore they would know only love, only happiness and never know what it is to have your world stop and become something unrecognizable. I would keep their hearts safe. I would do whatever I needed to so they would only know happiness, security, love.

But I failed.

I fell apart right next to them, I brought on this fear and pain into their hearts. The foundation I was trying to build, cracking when they were just barely four years old. I became their monster.

But in that moment I couldn't access whatever part of me usually catches this before it happens. There's no mask fast enough for this. There's no performance built for finding your husband cold in the bed you shared an hour ago.

He was only sixty-four. Woken live to five, six hundred years if they're careful, if they're lucky, and Gael didn't even get a hundredth of that. It started slow, almost nothing, him forgetting a word here, losing a thread of conversation there, the kind of thing you laugh about at first because surely it's nothing, surely a man that strong isn't breaking down from the inside for no reason. It's just stress.

I took him to every med-witch I could reach, and my ties to the crown meant that there were a great many med-witches, more than most people in Cadryn could ever hope to see. We changed his diet, his sleep routine. Someone recommended duskroot, ground into his tea every night, supposed

to clear the fog from a mind that's losing itself, and for a week I let myself believe it was working.

It wasn't working. Nothing was working. He just kept losing pieces of himself faster than any of us could catch, and then one night he went to sleep beside me the way he had a thousand nights before, but he didn't wake up.

I don't let myself think about that morning, not really, not straight on. I let it exist at the edges where I can manage it, because thinking about it directly means thinking about my children screaming because I was screaming, means admitting that the one thing I have built my entire life around, keeping them safe, keeping them from carrying scars they didn't choose, failed completely in the one moment it mattered most because of me.

I couldn't protect them from that morning. I couldn't even protect them from my own grief, let alone his death.

Bessa found us like that. She's told me since, gently, the only time she's ever brought it up at all, that she heard the screaming from the road and ran the last hundred yards. She took Lyra first. Then Tavon. She held them both until my own screaming finally wore itself down into something quieter, and Afilo stood in that doorway for a long time afterward, not saying anything, just being a wall between whatever remained of that morning and two children who'd have to carry it anyway.

I have never stopped being grateful to them for that. I have never once told them so out loud, because saying it means going back there, and I have exactly one setting for surviving… forward, and I intend to keep it that way.



The market doesn't wait for anyone's timeline. I move to head out the door.

I missed it yesterday. The ridge had taken longer than expected and then there was the matter of Alaric walking me back home then the Solenne in the evening. I had lain down on top of my blankets fully dressed, overanalyzing my discomfort with Alaric earlier in the day. I had the hardest time sleeping. Lying there in the dark thinking about what storm magic entailed and remembering the dark magic rituals my mother used to

tell me about. And a dragon who's been hiding his agitation since the pool with Tavon.

Nox is not very good at hiding things from me. That is the nature of the bond.

Needing to run to the market today throws the whole morning off. There is no time to take the ridge back out to the common ward the way I meant to yesterday, and that means I won’t be able to buy Hushroot, the old witch called it, and she was the only one still selling it, because no Woken would ever bother planting something so ugly on purpose. It slows the racing thoughts but still leaves you perfectly coherent. I will have to wait until next week. The royal market will have to do. Closer. Faster. Everything I do not actually want from a market, but time is not something I have extra of this morning. The king's summons will come today.



The market is already moving by the time I arrive. The eastern stalls open, and I can already hear vendors calling their morning prices into the dry air. The sun is not yet brutal, but it is getting there. Here in the royal market, where the stone walls are decorated with gold banners and ribbons lining the streets, I think how ridiculous it is that every Solenne needs to be so damn extravagant. But I guess that's all the *Woken* have to do with their time. Host parties and see who has the better jewels, more exotic animals or the biggest house.

The title of Woken is insufferable. Nox told me it is a self-given name adopted over 500 years ago to distinguish themselves from other species because the pointed ears and obvious power were not enough. What they are, in old language, is Fae. But you won't find the word *Fae* in any text book or spoken language. They are born with power running through their blood, the way humans are born, except the humans' magic is unreachable to them.

The majority of the Woken can do small things such as light a candle without a match, unlock a door without a key, keep wine cold in summer. Parlor tricks dressed up as superiority. Then there are the ones with real power. Wielders. Specific. Fire, storm, stone, or wind. One strength per

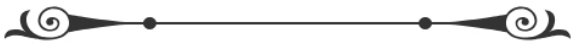
person, honed over a lifespan of around five hundred years if they are lucky. Those are the ones kings keep close. But above all of them, rarer than anything the Woken could ever dream to produce, are the Touched. Bonded to dragons and born of witches. That's about the extent of my knowledge on the matter. No one seems to know why I am different or why Touched are born at random but I am important enough for King Kuyprus to force these Solennes on me, on the ward, these excessive parties to honor the fact that Cadryn's Kingdom has the Touched. The last known Touched was a millennium ago.

I have thoughts about that. I spent my childhood being treated as nothing because the Woken thought I was human, lesser than them. Bastards. It doesn't matter how many Solennes they want to throw at me. I will play my part, let them believe me to be docile and shallow, because that is what keeps my children safe and fed.

Nox hates even using the term Woken and only refers to them as Fae but with fire spewing from his tongue when he says it and refuses to explain his ire.

Nox has had my back since I was eighteen, and even that came eighteen years too late to matter for most of what I had to survive alone. But a dragon's protection isn't the same as someone washing the blood out of your hair after a bad day, or bringing you soup when you're too sick to stand. Gael did that, for a while, though by then I'd already taught myself not to need it. Gael constantly told me I no longer needed to survive. It was too much for him, too hard to accept what I'd had to do in the human ward to keep Calla and me alive. So I learned to stay quiet. Learned to keep it locked, my past, my pains, and adjusted to the change of living in the mud to living in riches, and focused on the future. I thank the Stars that Gael had a normal childhood and couldn't handle the darker parts of the realm. It was hard for me to adjust to not having a partner to be fully open with and share my past pains but I had learned, and I have Nox to shoulder the trauma with. Gael was worth me carrying my darkness alone because he showed me what it was to see beauty in the world. Helped me look at the beauty around and not focus on the past. But I could never let go of the dark parts of me that were born by the hands of others.

I learned how to smile in the dark.



The market square is filled with Woken. You would never see humans here or witches. Humans have their own ward at the edge of Cadryn's borders near the coast and the registered witches are all in the common ward.

I move through the market stopping where I need to stop. Smiling at the vendors who know my face. The desert jasmine climbing the market wall turns slightly on its stems as I pass. The vendor beside it looks up at me, then at the vine, then away, shaking his head. I keep moving. I always keep moving. Blending in is a thing I have been attempting for years. It hasn’t worked since my power came in.

The bread baker on the corner of the eastern market has three fewer trays in his window than he had the week before. Not dramatically less, just less. The fabric merchant two stalls down has gaps on his shelves where the imported linens used to be. The spice vendor at the end of the row was watering down his oils. I can smell it from four feet away.

It is not dramatic. It is not the kind of less that makes people stop, point, and ask questions in the street. But I had grown up watching my mother read rooms the way other people read words, looking for the small shifts that arrived before the large ones, and this was a small shift. Supply lines thinning. Goods from the south are becoming scarce.

The vendors along this row have known my face for eight years. They feel me coming before they see me. A shift in the air, or so I am told, and by now they have learned to attach a face to it even if they could never explain what it is they are actually recognizing. Some of them nod before they look up. That stopped surprising me a long time ago.

I buy Lyra's sweet bread when Lady Mira spots me. Stars above, help me. Trying to pretend I can't see her, I spin to get out of the shop... she yells, "OH! LADY RYNN! What a wonderful surprise to see you here. I am just here for my--," as I turn to greet her, I spot Alaric a few rows over with two lords.

I can overhear some of his conversation, but Lady Mira is so damn loud.

"--tomorrow evening– Jacob will come–” Her words are coming in and out as I focus on Alaric's conversation. His voice is deep and low, but I

catch a few words. *Human ward. Tomorrow morning*. Something about a *meeting.* Then, he turns his head slightly in my direction as I look straight at him. For one second, our eyes lock. Blue is the first thing I notice. The gold rings have me struck as if they are holding me in place and I am getting lost in them. Gold does not belong in a human face or a Woken one. The kind of color that made you want to look away and then look back to make sure you had seen it correctly.

"..Lady Rynn?" Mira's words are catching up to me.

"Yes! Sorry, the heat... of course we will ensure Jacob and Tavon will meet at the Solenne." I smile politely as we part ways.

I rush off quickly to prevent her from following me to the next shop. Eventually, I have all I need from the market and start down the ridge to get home before the sun burns me.

Damn these gatherings are so annoying I complain to Nox.

You know being Touched demands you attend them all. At least in Cadryn... Nox reminds me.

I know but also being the only Touched, shouldn't I get a say in how I spend my evenings? In the warm springs down the mountain. Alone, secluded and just drinking with my books? I whine.

Touched are so rare, born from witches... Nox starts to recite the fucking manuscript of old

Bloodlines. Yea yea I got it. Just let me grumble damnit. I spat at him.

I am blessed. At least that's what I am told. Besides the money and luxury King Kuyprus gives me and my family, I don't see what the big deal is. I mean sure I get a dragon who acts like a mother hen but my magic is just the same as the Woken... I assume. I don’t use my magic even when Nox pushes me to. It’s not something I care to try out. Power gets you killed and as long as my children are safe, there is no need to fix something that's not broken. The king claims a Touched is unique and deserves the recognition. I know how vague it sounds but I could not care less. Cadryn publicly celebrates the Touched with ceremony, honors, and festivals but it's not like that everywhere, hence parents running and hiding most of their lives. Woken try to get close to me, be my friend, all because of this mark on my skin. I put up with it, of course, for my kids, for my home, even if it feels like it can all be ripped away at any moment. Exactly like when my mother was killed. I don’t trust anyone. Except Bessa and Afilo, who were a large part of my ‘transition’ into royal society.

When Gael found me at eighteen, sitting in a heap on the floor with my sister, in front of a burned corpse, light pouring out of my mark casting stars around the room, I had no clue I was born as a Touched. So when the king sent his top guard to locate the source of the ground moving when my power broke out, he didn’t even care I just killed a man. Instead, gave his 'We honor the Touched' speech at my discovery. I didn't buy a word of it.

My parents were both witches and had come from the Drenoch Kingdom, where what you were determined whether you lived on your feet or on your knees. Drenoch enslaved anyone who wasn't Woken. Human, witch, shaman, it made no difference. And everyone knew, even if no one said it out loud, that witches were kept for their use. Power that could rival a Woken's was not something Drenoch let go to waste. Witches had the luxury of using the elements around them to create great magic that intimidates most kings rather than the Woken who typically only had one specific power. Cadryn and Aeryndel were the exceptions, the only two of the six kingdoms where you could be what you were without fear it would get you killed. At least by law. There was still plenty the law simply looked away from if you weren't Woken. My parents had heard enough to believe it. Enough to run toward Cadryn with four daughters and nothing else.

They made it to Cadryn and kept the kind of quiet that settles into people who have spent years making themselves invisible. Cadryn treated its witches well, at least on paper, better than anywhere else in the six kingdoms. My parents could have registered, lived without the tightness that settles into every room when you're hiding something but they weren't going to bet their four daughters on a king's assurances. So they kept their mouths shut. Not trusting.

I can only assume my parents also knew I was Touched considering something had to have been done to suppress my power for so long. Touched are so rare, that there is no history to point to. No book. No precedent. Nothing written down about what any kingdom did with one. Cadryn's love for the Touched didn't exist before me. Not the festivals. Not the ceremonies. Not the king's protection. That came later, built from nothing the moment I was found.

The one thing I've heard about the Touched came from Nox and he loves repeating it to me. Light seeps from a Touched child the moment they're born and bonds instantly at birth with their destined dragon. If that's true, my parents didn't have to guess what I was. They saw it happen, then spent

the rest of my childhood making sure I never found out. They buried it instead of telling me. I grew up believing it was an odd birthmark that looked more like tiny spots around my shoulders and collarbone that closed up and became scars. The mark down my spine was more of a large fracture mark as if wanting to split my body in two. I will never get to ask them why they thought I was safer not knowing what I was. They took that answer with them. My markings now are like holes made into my skin. The fine pinholes and delicate random lines look like a constellation system but none I've ever seen before and the mark on my spine looks to be filled with silver and white liquid metal but when touched, it's like skin.

Being aware of what happens to people different from Woken, in kingdoms like Drenoch, a banner and a speech from a king does not make you feel safe. Drenoch's king would allow his people to put on these *games* with the witches to have some fun. Pitting the enslaved against each other in pits and saying, "If you win, you will be free." But when they opened the pit, they would have spouses against each other, parent against child, best friends. They did it purposefully to make it more painful, more eventful. And of course no one was set free. All of it just to entertain the Woken scum. So my parents chose to stay small. Stay quiet and raised four girls in the human ward. My father was gone more than he was home in those initial years here in Cadryn. I did not understand it then, not really, only that our door would close behind him some mornings without explanation and he would not be back that night, or the next. Sometimes not for weeks at a time. My mother never explained it either. She went quiet in a different way when he left, a tightness that moved into her shoulders, into her voice, and stayed there the whole time he was gone. Snapping at things that hadn't earned it, at four girls underfoot in a house too small to hide from her mood. I learned early not to ask where he'd gone. Asking only made the tightness worse.

Then the door would open again, like nothing had happened, and it was like watching a god walk back into the house. My sisters and I dropped whatever we were doing and ran for him the way you run for something you've been starving for, and for two days, maybe three, he was the best father in every kingdom. I told myself his attention was pointed straight at all of us, that we were the only thing that had ever mattered to him. I know now that was never quite true. It was Sylla he kept closest, my older sister he would whisper things with and they would giggle privately never willing

to share. I did not understand it then. I did not want to understand it. I was too busy chasing whatever scraps landed close enough for me to reach, calling it love because it was the only word I had for wanting something that badly.

The last time, I did not know it was the last time. There was no fight I can point to, no door slammed harder than any other morning. He left, and somewhere around the tenth month I stopped waiting for the sound of it opening again. My mother never said his name after that. She held the four of us together with both of her bare hands and I did not understand until I had children of my own exactly what that costs a person.

I was seven when the Woken came for my mother. Someone had reported her as an unregistered witch living in the human ward, invisible in a place that required visibility. I have turned that fact over so many times it has gone smooth and cold in my hands, and I still don't know who. Only that it had to have been someone close enough to know what to look for. What I know is that the Guard grabbed her in the market. I was not there to see. Our neighbors told us. Not details, just that she was not coming back and we now needed to hide ourselves amongst them.

The Guard left after killing our mother in the market. No search of the house. No further inquiry. One name on a list was handled and the list closed. They did not know there were four girls somewhere in the ward who would not understand why their mother had not come home, and one father who was never coming to look.

Nobody turned us in though. Not out of love. Not out of loyalty. Out of the mathematics of self preservation. Being a witch in Cadryn is not a crime, sure, but it comes with a condition. You register with the crown. You become known and if you were the one who walked the children of witch parents to the crown's door you had better hope the crown believed you hadn't known all along.

Nobody wanted that conversation. So they did the next cleanest thing. They passed us quietly from household to household, one family absorbing the problem for a year or two before finding a reason to move us along to the next. Keeping us presented as human and fed enough to not cause questions. Keeping us invisible enough to not cause trouble. Keeping their own hands clean enough to sleep at night.

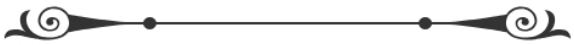
My sisters and I were scattered. Different homes. Different fates. That is a door I don't open often, but I was thankful Helen took both me and Calla in

together.

I had five homes between the ages of seven to fifteen. Each one left something on me I still carry. Then I was on my own.

When my magic finally connected at eighteen, it crossed the kingdom like a wave and suddenly everyone knew exactly what I was. Something nobody had thought to look for.

I had learned early that kindness from people always had another meaning. Gael had been the exception to that rule. For five years after, he never stopped giving me love that was unconditional and without expectation.



The summons from King Kuyprus is waiting for me as I arrive home.

Every three months or so a formal invitation arrived at my door. Embossed seal, formal language, the whole performance. The crown liked to check on its Touched. Liked to ensure I was comfortable, well provided for, content within the generous arrangement Cadryn offered its rarest citizen. It is dressed up as caring for my wellbeing. But in reality it is surveillance dressed as ceremony which I can not figure out why he cares so much but I will never forget his order to kill mother for simply not registering. How he treats those less than Woken. He thinks I've stopped fighting because I've stopped flinching after all these years. I let him underestimate me. After all, real power is restraint and in the aftermath of chaos, it could never come from the woman with a soft voice and gentle smile.

I dress carefully. A deep rust silk, the fabric draped at the shoulder and belted at the waist with a chain of hammered gold, the skirt falling in layers that move as I walk. Adara applied perfectly with gem stones pressed along my eyebrow line in three rows like the old style, dark amber and white swirls with my two diagonal lines adorn the right side of my cheekbone. My hair is loose with a single braid threaded through with gold clasps and string. My dagger is in place beneath the fabric where it always is.

My smile is ready before the gates to the palace open.



Something is wrong with the castle.

The accumulation of small things that individually mean nothing and together makes an uncomfortable feeling under my skin. Like black ink boiling at the base of my stomach and spread upward.

The guards at the main gate seem bigger than I remember. Not the same guards I note but new ones. They are broader through the shoulder, eyes forward in a way that feels empty rather than trained. There is a difference in the air surrounding them unlike the typical Guard.

The main corridor is less clean than it had been at my last visit. Not dirty. Just less attended to. A film on the stone that suggests the usual staff have been reduced or replaced or redirected to something else. Tapestries that had always hung perfectly straight have a slight wrinkle to them. Small. The air seems stuffy with dust. Did the servants forget to come to the palace this week?

King Kuyprus receives me in his private study rather than the receiving room. This is new. He is standing when I enter which is also new. He usually receives visitors seated, the practiced ease of a man comfortable in his authority. Standing meant something has disturbed that comfort recently.

He looks thinner. The skin below his eyes is bruised like he has not been sleeping or sleeping badly.

"Lady Rynn." He smiles. Warm enough on the surface but his pupils seem dilated. "You look well."

"Your Majesty." I curtsy exactly as much as protocol requires. "As do you."

We receive these pleasantries out of habit; neither of us mean a word of it.

The check-in proceeds the way they always do. Questions about my comfort, my children, my needs within the kingdom. My answers are warm and appreciative, I tell him precisely nothing. His questions seem kind and gentle on the surface. Underneath them, I feel him rushing to mark me off his list and move on.

We have been doing this my whole adult life.

I am curious if the King has anything to say about the lessening of supplies in the market.

"I had been looking for a silk blend last month. Imported from the south. My seamstress said the supplier had gone quiet." Unbothered, ready to ask if he has any idea when the shipment might arrive. The words die in my mouth. The king goes rigid. His eyes go wide with fear as if I have grown a second head.

"Are people talking? What did you hear?" His words come out too fast. "Who is this seamstress?"

I keep my face open and mildly confused, which is easy because I *am* mildly confused. "I only noticed it wasn't available at the market, Your Majesty. Nothing more than that." A flicker of worry moves through me. I do not want my seamstress pulled into whatever this is.

He seems to deflate slightly. Huffs a laugh, "HA! Good, good. That's good." His voice starts to drift off.

I am not sure what to do. Something is very wrong with him, and I don't get paid enough in gowns and jewels to manage a king losing his mind in real time. He is quiet for an awkward amount of time. Eyes drifting away as if lost in thought. He needs to dismiss me, I think. Can I just bid him farewell? Will this upset him if I request leave before he does?

I am preparing to take my leave when he says it.

His words are not directed at me but I can see something crossing his face that I catch before he locks in his emotions. Something like a decision he is battling inside and comes to a conclusion.

"Drenoch," he snaps more to himself than me. "They think they can expand north without consequence."

I keep my expression pleasant and curious. "Your Majesty?"

He turns back, focusing on my face with a startle. Did he forget we were just talking? He smooths his expression. "Nothing to concern yourself with, Lady Rynn. Merely politics. My apologies, we need to wrap this up. Thank you again for visiting with me. I am glad to hear that you and the children are happy and thriving." He smiles.

I smile back, knowing full well he has no intention of answering me about the fabric.

I stand curtseying low and slow to hide my need to get out of this room and I leave the King to his thoughts. Inside my chest, something dark spreads like shadows consuming all light. Every instinct I have awakens at

once. Nope. Not this. He sounds like a man bracing for something he already knows is coming. Men who sound like that are dangerous, especially with his kind of power. Fear that deep doesn't stay contained. I know what happens when someone feels cornered and the walls start closing in. Not everyone cowers. Some have claws. A king has claws.

I will never be helpless again or put in the middle of whatever is going on.

I don't know what's moving between kingdoms and I could not care less. But I know when something is about to go bad. You feel it in your bones before your mind catches up. I have felt this before. I barely walked away from it before. Helen made sure I would never be caught without an exit again. Her teachings are in the scars on my legs, a locked door for days. I learned to count exits before I count anything else. I stopped thinking about Helen a long time ago. The lessons stayed anyway.

My children are the only thing on my mind.

As I walk to the castle exit with my spine straight, a picture of composure, certainty settles cold and heavy in my chest. My children will not be safe in this kingdom much longer and they are all that matters. It is better to be proactive and hope nothing happens rather than sit back when my gut is screaming at me something is wrong.

Their safety is not a choice. I will protect them even if it kills me.



I leave reeling through what action I need to take.*We can get them out of the city* Nox suggests, providing me with some options.

Send them to your sister. Quietly. A visit. No one questions a woman sending her children to family. Nox pauses and I don't speak, still processing. *Or we can leave. Find somewhere away across the realm. I traveled everywhere for eighteen years trying to find you. I can take us somewhere safe.*

Shit is about to go down I know it. But I don't want to take the kids traveling across the realm to unknown places. It could be more dangerous. No. I need a plan.

What are you thinking? Nox would go to the ends of the world for me and I know it. Do whatever it takes to keep me and my children from harm.

I'm not sure what is happening but I need to get to the low market.

That's too risky! He bellows into our bond. *There is nothing good there. Outcasts and desperate people doing desperate things. It is not safe.*

It is decided. I don't have a choice. I tell him coldly.

Not knowing what is coming makes it impossible to see which direction to go but if I can get an overall protection for the twins then I must. I need a way to get there without questions. I say. A reason. A cover.

Nox stays quiet while I process.

He knows not to push further. He isn't happy. I can feel that but when I set my mind to something, I do it. I can tell he is on edge with this decision but I am not ready to share more just yet.

I know the low market is just past the human ward. Near the border of Cadryn. It is a place mothers tell their kids they will go if they don't eat their dinner. But for me, I used to view it as an escape. When you are beaten at nine years old with a thick wooden paddle, spikes embedded on the end, you start doing the math on your options differently.

I have been doing that math for years, since I was young. Running the numbers on what was worse, the known or the unknown. The low market at least does not pretend to be something it isn't. Everything in my life that had hurt me had smiled first. I never ended up escaping to the low market. Couldn't get the courage to leave Calla.

I thought of taking Calla with me then, when she was fifteen but my power broke free, Gael found me. Physically and emotionally he saved me like I was worth the interruption to his life. He was the man who changed the world for me.

I crack up thinking back on the time I was brought to the castle at eighteen. I was bound by chains and dragged into the throne room where the King was looking down his nose at me with a cruel smile across his lips.

"So you have decided to hide from me. Decided to take it upon yourself to break the very generous laws I have for witches, which in turn apply to you, to register."

I was silent trying to process the fact that I was in the castle on my knees before the King. The King that has knowingly suppressed half the Kingdom of Cadryn. Allows his guards to do as they please with the meek without reprimand and this male with all his control was before me.

"Answer me!" The King's impatience was clear and not used to allowing others time to process.

Before I could get a word out, Nox landed on the lawn of the front doors of the castle. His roar was so loud it vibrated the stone around us. I didn't think I just ran to him, away from the stunned King and shaking guards. Guards started shouting after me, but all I could feel was Nox and the need to put my hands directly against his scales. It was as if my heart was outside my chest and I needed us to be whole.

I was flying down a corridor that I've never been down before but my heart knew where to go. There was a sound in my chest like a second heartbeat, learning to match mine.

"Get back," I screamed to the guards at the doors, and my voice didn’t sound like my voice but rather a voice that expected to be obeyed. "Get back or I will move you myself."

It was the first time I saw him with my own eyes instead of only feeling him. Black scales, so black they pull the torchlight in and swallow it, except where the auburn shows through, banked like coals under ash, catching at the ridge of every scale along his spine and throat, brightest where the muscle moves. He is bigger than the massive double doors of the castle. His teeth were exposed and he growled viciously at the guards pointing their swords at him with shaky arms.

Those fucking chains were still holding me hostage and the itch to touch him was unbearable. I felt that power boiling up inside, same as when I saw that man grabbing Calla, and without thought, the chains disintegrated on their own. Ash falling to the ground.

The guards didn't get back. At that same moment one guard launched an arrow at Nox's shoulder which bounced off and I felt that impact, another one turned his weapon toward me, unsure whether I am a threat or a girl needing protection from one, and in the space of that hesitation, Nox decided for him.

His enormous size swung around faster than anything that size should move, and his claw swept low. The guard pointing his sword at me was gone along with two others that were standing near. The men flew to the other side of the grounds and landed hard. I couldn't tell if they were dead or alive and I didn't care, I just needed to get to Nox. He moved his neck side to side like something coiled tight, fighting its own instinct to burn the building down around us.

When the path to him was finally cleared, I ran to him and immediately put my hands flat against his side, over the place where the arrow struck but didn't pierce, and the auburn there pulsed brighter, like something under the black scales is answering my palm directly. He goes still under my hand breathing a sigh of relief. I felt it settle into my own chest at the same moment, some part of me that had been reaching since before I had a word for what I was reaching toward, closing the last of the distance, I brought my cheek flush with his warm scales and breathed deeply.

We stayed like that for a while. I felt my soul sing and my core strengthen from within. It was as if I never knew what true comfort was until this moment and it scared me.

That was the first time I heard the King's fear, dressed up as wonder.

I told you I'd come, Nox said, finally, low enough that I felt it more than heard it.

"You didn't say it would feel like this... all encompassing warmth and wholeness"

No. I didn't know it would be either. I felt Nox's joy and love pouring into me through our bond, our souls. The feeling of vulnerability was crushing. Nox could see all of me. Could visually see all of my past when we initially bonded, making me extremely uncomfortable to have another being be aware of my dark history and my dark mind.

The King never put guards between us again. Not that night, and not after. I understand now what I didn't then, kneeling in that throne room in chains... he brought me there to die. Whatever law he threw at me about registration was never the real charge. I was Touched, and I know now what that means to a King.

Nox changed his mind for him.

A blade through an unregistered witch costs a King nothing. A dragon leveling three guards without blinking could cost him everything. I saw it on his face, that quaking, that fear dressed up as wonder. He couldn't kill what he couldn't beat, so he buried me in luxury instead of a blade. That's when the Solennes started, the gowns, the jewels, the endless celebration of Cadryn's honor at having me, comfort thrown at me so thick I would never want for anything again nor be aware of its cage.

His coin saved Calla back then and that was all that mattered. When you are a survivor, you don’t have ego, you do whatever it takes to get to the next step.



While I head home from the castle, I turn over in my mind how to get to the low market without drawing questions. A lady traveling alone to the border is not a scandal exactly. It is the kind of thing people would notice and mention especially being the Touched. A lady traveling with a merchant on legitimate business is another thing entirely. I need a reason.

I think about the market this morning. His voice. *Human ward. Meeting.*

I think about the merchant who is not a merchant, with a storm in his bones and dark magic in his blood going to the same place I need to go.

I need a seamstress crisis, I conclude. Oh Stars above, my life is stupid. But it's a believable excuse.



The twins go down hard at night. Tavon first, mid-sentence, one hand still curled around the story I've been telling him, his breathing goes slow and even before I finish the page. Lyra holds out longer. She always does. She lies watching me with those careful dark eyes until whatever she was turning over finally resolves itself into something she can sleep on, and then she closes them without ceremony and that is that.

I sit between their beds for a few minutes after. Just sit. Listening to them breathe the way I have listened every night of their lives. The particular rhythm of it. Tavon a little louder. Lyra is so quiet when she sleeps that I have to forcibly walk out of the room every night after my tenth breathing check. Some things don't change and these moments are the most grounding.

I press two fingers to my lips and then lightly press them on Tavon's hand where it lies open on the blanket. I stand and move to the window.

The stars are out.

I have been feeling it since before dinner. That pull. Low in my sternum, persistent. I have no name for it. It has always been there, this awareness of the sky, this sense that something up there is oriented toward me the same way the bond with Nox is. A presence that does not announce itself but exists anyway. I have stopped asking what it means and instead just go when I feel it, on the nights I can. It is better after than before, and I have learned not to examine things that work.

I change into my training clothes. Dark leathers, close-fitted, nothing that could catch air badly. Lacing my boots, taking my dagger from the bedside and strapping it to my thigh out of habit more than necessity because there is nowhere in Cadryn I go unarmed, including the sky.

Before I leave, I press my palm to the ward stone set into the doorframe, the one Calla renews every visit, and feel it answer back with warmth. Steady. Whole. If it ever goes cold, I will know it no matter how far I fly.

I leave a note on the kitchen table where they'd find it if they woke, the same note in one form or another most nights. *Flying. Back before sunrise.* They know the routine by now. If they wake to an empty house, they wouldn't worry. Nothing gets past that door while I am away, and I always come back.

I check the twins one more time, then head out back.

Nox is waiting in the same place we always take off from, away from most prying eyes. Past the last line of the royal ward, past the wilderness behind the house, in the wide flat clearing where the red rock drops away into the valley and nothing stands between him and the open sky. He settles himself low to the ground, which still puts his shoulder well above my head. His scales catch the moonlight in a way that makes him look carved from the dark itself, black shoots through with deep auburn at the edges where the light catches.

He does not move when I approach. He feels me coming long before I arrive.

His head turns. One enormous eye finds me with an attention that has never once in eight years felt anything less than total. Not the way a man looks at you, assessing. The way something ancient looks at the one thing in the world it has crossed centuries to find.

Ready? I push through the bond.

I have been ready, his impatience coming through, *since before you finished your dinner.*

I ignore his remark and walk to his foreleg. He is just as antsy as I am to get back up into the sky.

This is the part that no one who has never done it would believe. There is no tack. No saddle, no harness, no stirrup. Nothing has ever been made for this because nothing has ever needed to be made. Dragons left hundreds of years ago. Even before that, Touched are the only ones to bond that I know of and we are so few and far between that gear does not exist.

The first time I had tried to get onto Nox's back I was eighteen years old and had fallen off twice while we were still on the ground. He watched both times with an expression I have learned to recognize as the dragon equivalent of profound patience being tested.

I know his body as if it were my own. The foreleg first, his scales are larger, overlapping like armor plates, and the leading edge of each one gives enough to grip if you know the angle. I put my boot to the first scale joint, find the ridge above it with my hands, and pull. Eight years of twice-daily training means the pull is nothing. I go up his foreleg in three moves, hand-foot-hand, to the broad shelf of his shoulder where the neck begins its upward curve, and from there I walk the ridge of him carefully, not because of uncertainty but because his scales are smooth at the shoulder and the drop on either side is significant, until I reach the hollow.

It is always there. Just below where his neck rises away from his shoulders, a natural depression in the muscle and scale where the wind brakes differently and the warmth of him collects. I am small enough to sit inside it properly. That surprised me the first time, how well I fit, like the hollow had been made for exactly my size and no other. I settled into it, bracing my palms flat against his neck on either side as best I can and grip. His warmth comes up through my hands immediately.

Ready.

He stands. The ground drops away before I register the motion. That is the thing about Nox, for something his size, the launch is not gradual. He decides to be airborne and then he is, his wings catch the air in one massive downstroke that I feel in my sternum and my back teeth simultaneously. The clearing is below us, and then the royal ward, and then Cadryn itself. The lights of it, the sandstone warm and amber even at night, shrinking to something I can cover with my palm.

I flatten against his neck and hold.

The wind at low altitude is manageable. Above the ridge it becomes something else entirely. It comes at me from every direction at once. Not cold the way the ground wind is at this time of night but sharp, the kind that presses your eyes back in their sockets and pulls your hair from whatever was holding it and takes everything that wasn't fastened down. My dark hair whips free behind me. I keep my face pressed low into the hollow and breathe through my nose, letting my body move with him instead of against him. You can not brace against Nox. You move how he moves or you do not stay on.

He levels at altitude, then there is nothing.

The night air finds the mark on my back and shoulders. Cold against the branches of it, tracing the lines of it the way fingers trace a scar. On the ground I forget it is there most of the time. Up here I always remember. Not out of pain but rather something in it that responds to the open sky the way lungs respond to clean air after too long in a closed room. Whatever had been sleeping in my skin since birth, cracked open and has been reaching for this closeness ever since and only procures it twice a week when I can get this close to beyond.

Something in my sternum unknots when I am high enough to see the stars properly, pressing in from every direction, and whatever has been sitting on my chest since that Solenne, since the pool, since Tavon's hands fisted in my dress... releases just enough that I can breathe past it. I have no name for what the stars do to me. I have stopped needing one.

No sound except the wind. No ward below us, no lanterns, no voices, no names anyone expects me to answer to. No fake pleasantries or smiles. Just as the mountain range cuts into the horizon, I feel the whole realm awake. I become a part of it.

Nox moves a bit higher up, feeling my need to be closer. The stars are everywhere as if I am swimming in them. Gliding gently along them. More stars than I have words for. More than I have ever counted, and I tried once, lying on the roof of my second foster home at ten years old with a bruised shoulder and swollen eye, I needed to count them then, I needed to feel them then. Now being amongst space, you no longer feel the light of the moon. I am a part of the star system now and finally my sternum loosens.

Not all the way. It never loosens all the way. But the compression of it, the weight that lives between my shoulder blades on the ground that constantly has me at a low-grade readiness of a body that has never fully

believed it is safe. It releases, just slightly, just enough that I notice the absence of it and understand that I have been carrying it so long I stopped feeling it as a weight.

I press my hands harder against Nox's neck and tip my face up and let the wind take my hair as I look at the stars, not thinking about kings or wards or the smell of the human ward I had grown up in or the sound of my father walking out the door. I do not think about the man with a storm in his veins and eyes that catalogue everything they land on. I think about nothing, and the nothing is not empty. It is enormous and salted with light. It presses against me from every direction.

Nox banks east.

The motion is slow, a long sweeping turn that tilts the horizon. Bringing the mountains close on my left and the open desert far below on my right. I lean into it without thinking, my body knowing his before he commits to it.

How long? I ask through the bond.

His warmth shifts. Something that is not quite amusement but lives near it. *As long as you need.*

I need to be back before Bessa arrives.

Then we have time.

He knows how much I love this, more than I ever let myself admit with my feet on the ground. I turn my face back to the stars and let him give me the time he already knows I need.

Below us the valley is quiet. Above us the sky goes on without end. Somewhere in the dark between the two of us. This enormous ancient creature and the small woman pressed against his neck. Something holds that does not require a name.

The horizon is already softening at the edges, the first pink bleeding up along the ridge. I want to stay for the sunrise, gold and warm, the kind I can feel spreading across my skin before it even fully breaks the horizon. But Bessa would be at the door soon, and I was not about to make her stand there wondering where I am.

I stay until the cold gets into my hands.

Then I press my palm flat against him once and he turns us home.

OceanofPDF.com



CHAPTER FOUR

Alaric

Lord Fennick's Solenne is the fourth one I have attended in eleven days. I learn to identify the host by the quality of the wine and the size of the insecurity. Fennick runs to good wine and large insecurity. I accept a glass and find a wall and get to work.

I have been in Cadryn for eleven days. Eleven days of Solennes, market eavesdropping and conversations with people who take me for exactly the merchant I am pretending to be, treating me with as much warmth as they can muster for someone who might be useful to them. It is a gamble, walking into the royal ward with ears that don't end in a point, but I know they'd throw that "character flaw" out the window the second they hear my name. Vael tells anyone who'll listen about the shipment of Dukmere steel he brokered through me, three months back, a set of ceremonial blades forged in dragonfire and sold to a collector in Solvaeth for a price that makes Vael's own coffers noticeably heavier. It’s all a cover story but the Lords love it.

Lord Henrix is the best of them. The worst of them. He introduced himself at the second gathering and has not stopped bothering me since. Short blond hair, a little too carefully arranged for a man trying to pass as desert-born, jeweled rings on nearly every finger like he'd bought out half a market stall trying to look like he belonged here instead of wherever money he came from. He understands that connections are currency and has decided I am worth investing in.

I let him. That is the job.

The binding on my forearm has been quiet today. That happens sometimes. A day of stillness before it tightens again, the dark magic that

sits in my blood like a weight holding me underwater, reminding me it is still there. Still holding. Still counting down. I have stopped thinking about the timeline it implies. Thinking about it does nothing and I need the space in my head for other things.

Tonight, for instance.

Lord Vael is across the terrace. He has been watching me for the last twenty minutes and obviously wants a word but is waiting for the right moment to manufacture one. He is the king's man in Cadryn. Has been for three years, embedded in the royal ward under a title that means nothing and a cover that is solid enough that nobody has looked twice. His job is to support my mission. Provide cover. Smooth whatever needs smoothing.

His job is not to hover.

I turn away from him and find Henrix instead.

He is mid-story, explaining something about a contact near the coast who has expressed interest in opening a new trade route through the human ward. I listen, feigning intrigue for a promising business deal and let him talk himself into the details. That is the thing about Henrix: he needs very little prompting. Give him an attentive face and a drink and he will lay out everything you need to know without realizing he is doing it.

He is pushing on regarding the human ward we discussed earlier, about traveling tomorrow morning and a meeting with this contact about the opportunity of a lifetime.

I think about Lady Rynn, who I saw at the market that morning. A few rows over, she had some bread in hand, Lady Mira descending on her with such enthusiasm it was as if she craved to be the star attraction. Whatever Mira was saying was loud enough to carry across half the market. I watch Rynn's face arrange itself into warm attention and think, she is either genuinely interested in whatever Mira is telling her, or she is very good. I am fairly certain it is the latter.

But I notice when she comes into the Solenne. Everyone notices. She is not the most elaborately dressed woman in the room. She is not the loudest, but the room notices her anyway. Three separate conversations stop mid-sentence as she passes. The people holding them look up, can't name how they know she is there, smile kindly, and go back to talking.

It has to be her power. Something rolls off her that pulls you in without asking. I feel the familiar twinge of pain then, the dark magic wrapped around my wrist, the blood bond twisting, trying to pull me back as my

body leans toward her instead. I don't pay attention to the pain. She is finally in my sights.

Henrix turns to me with his chin lifted and his glass already extended slightly, the posture of a man presenting something he has already decided you would want. A contact near the coast. A trade route through the human ward. Real money in it, he says, for someone with the right reach and the vision to see it. His eyebrows go up on "vision". He has practiced this.

I glance toward Vael across the terrace. His back is angled away, head tilted toward whoever has his attention. He has not heard any of this.

"I appreciate the offer but my schedule tomorrow—"

"One morning." Henrix's smile doesn't waver. His eyes stay steady and warm and entirely immovable. "Two hours at most. I have already told him about you, in fact. He is very much looking forward to the introduction."

He has already told him? Manipulating prick…

I look toward Vael again. Still turned away. Still useless.

Declining now means Henrix will question why not; he will now need to explain to a contact, who is already expecting me, why. This means questions about me, a merchant, who comes here under the pretenses of business so I can be allowed at these damn royal Solennes to talk money and who cannot afford questions.

"It's in the human ward, Lord Henrix. That's a good distance away. I believe about two days round trip." I try to reason with him as to why last-minute ventures aren't plausible, but before I can continue he jumps in. "You are here for business, are you not? This could potentially be the best venture yet! You won't need to travel much longer with money like this."

I stay quiet for a moment as he continues. "Listen, a merchant who's already traded successfully between kingdoms, imagine the coin you could make with access to Cadryn's own trading port. It's worth a simple trip down to the coast."

I look back again to Vael, who clearly forgot he has a job to do, and it's not ogling women's asses. I hold my sigh from escaping and look at Henrix. "Okay. But the human ward is a bit of travel, so we will need to be quick about it, as I have other meetings to attend while I am here."

The corners of Henrix's mouth pull wide and his shoulders drop half an inch. The exhale of a man who has been holding a door open and just felt it catch. He appears so thrilled about this meeting that I know he won't ask

about what other meetings with whom because well… I don't have any other meetings except prepping for the kidnap.

I have just agreed to a full day and a half trip, might as well be two, with a Cadryn nobleman I do not need to spend time with. Lord Vael is going to have thoughts about that but Vael can keep his thoughts to himself since he is supposed to be by my side all night exactly for reasons like Henrix.

The carriage arrangement presents itself approximately four minutes later.

She materializes out of the crowd. Subtly, not the same kind of entrance Lady Mira had when she came to the Solenne. Rynn must have practiced in front of mirrors all her life; she falls into our conversation so smoothly, as if she has been standing here all along and the crowd simply parted to reveal her.

She turns to accept a glass from a passing tray, the lantern light falls across her back and I see it. A branching pattern running up her spine, spreading over both shoulders, the color of it silver and barely there, something under the surface of her golden tanned skin rather than on top of it. I have seen her unique markings several times now but still don't know what I am looking at. Seeing her like this, though, the silver of it against her skin in the lantern light is one of the most striking things I have ever seen on a person. My head tells me I need to stop looking at it before my face says something I don't intend it to.

I look away.

I have to look back.

There is so much I want to absorb about her, need to learn about her. Her face art catches my attention next, before her jewelry. The adara she wears is geometric, iron black lines at her cheekbone, copper dots beneath her left eye that catch in the lantern light, turn amber the same as her eyes, charcoal pressed deep at the lash. I have seen adara on half the women at every Solenne in Cadryn. I have not paid attention before but I am now.

The copper beneath her eye makes her irises look darker than brown. Almost red in the right light. The charcoal makes the color underneath seem like something that has been burning a long time. Whatever she decided about her face before she walked out the door this evening, she decided it precisely and without apology.

My jaw tightens and I look away again.

I have a job to do and a king waiting on the outcome of it and absolutely no time to stand at a Cadryn Solenne getting pulled sideways by a woman's

face paint like some lord who has never seen gold before in his life.

The light bouncing off her jewelry onto her chest causes a hypnotizing contrast to the parts that remain in the dark. Her skin where the light lands is smooth, looking so soft. I feel my eyes narrow on her and my fist clench to stop from touching her.

I have no business noticing that too.

She smiles at Henrix and still does not look at me. After the encounter on the ridge, it seems almost on purpose to be ignored. Interesting. Lord Vael has drifted closer now, finally attempting to pay attention to the task at hand. I can feel him at the edge of the group, waiting.

Henrix, being Henrix, includes her immediately. "We were just discussing some business plans in the human ward for tomorrow. Nothing to bore you with, Lady Rynn," Henrix's sly voice scratches my ears. Vael subtly elbows me in the side while maintaining his smile at the interaction between Rynn and Henrix. I slowly turn my head toward Vael and raise an eyebrow to him. If this fucker thinks he can walk in on a conversation and elbow me about the trip tomorrow that he was supposed to be here to prevent, then he has another thing coming.

I see Henrix step a little closer to Rynn and begin to say, "How are th–" but Rynn interrupts. "That is so funny you say that, I myself am headed there in the morning. There is a seamstress crisis I really must see to." A soft laugh. Self-deprecating. The laugh of a woman who knew it was a small thing and was mildly embarrassed to need to attend to it.

I can see she is not embarrassed. But her performance is to be applauded. My eyes narrow. I am some kinda lucky bastard.

"A lady should not be traveling alone," I interject.

She looks at me then. Brief. Assessing. The same look she gave me from the pool and from the ridge and from every gathering in between. She doesn't trust me. Good. She shouldn't.

"Share my carriage," I push on. "We leave when you wish."

A pause.

"That is very generous." Her voice is kind and alluring; it would make any male fall to his knees for her. "I would not want to hold up your schedule."

"You won't. It will be a relief for Henrix to have someone more intriguing to talk to on the journey." Henrix laughs at that.

"Yes, yes Lady Rynn you must join us. We will provide protection and accommodations in exchange for such wonderful company. We will meet off Shirley road just after dawn." His charm sickening as his rings irritatingly shine from the lamp light as he talks.

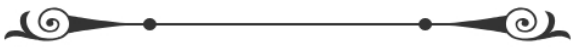
It is kinda nice having someone as pushy as Henrix around once in a while because he just makes my life a hundred times easier.

"Very well," She says through clenched teeth at Henrix. I don't think anyone here can notice since her smile is the same lustrous smile she gives everyone. But I saw her jaw tick and I saw her with those men at the ridge. I don't know how much protection she really needs.

She accepts a glass from a passing tray and turns back toward the gathering and with a slight nod, it seems she just glides away on a pillow of air.

I watch her go.

Vael is at my shoulder approximately three seconds later looking like a madman with his eyes wide as if they could speak with a tight smile. Damn… I have a headache already.



He waits until we are back at his residence. Until the door closes and the servants leave and there is no one to hear whatever he is about to say. I give him credit for that much.

"A carriage?!" Vael says, trying to contain his irritation.

"Yes."

"You agreed to take her to the human ward in a carriage. With Henrix."

"Also yes."

His eyes are glowing from the fire he lit. We are in the fucking desert and when the sun goes down it feels like my home up North. Freezing. Vael is pissed but careful. That is why the king uses him. But careful men still reached their limits and I had apparently found his.

"The king sent you here to bring her back," he highlights. "Not to escort her to the coast on a social trip. You have been here eleven days. You have attended seven gatherings. You have had exactly three conversations with

her and walked away from all of them with nothing to show for it. And now you are putting her in a carriage?”

He is not wrong. I am aware he is not wrong, and I hate him a little more for saying it out loud.

"The king wants her alive," I grunted.

"The king wants her in Korreth."

"Those are the same requests."

Vael spreads his fingers and puts them palm to palm like he is trying to gain patience from a God that doesn’t answer.

"Then take her! You have the means. You have the skill. Now you have her alone and away from the royal ward, find the right moment, and be done with this. Why are we still here after all this time? Eleven days. I was told you were efficient. Is someone getting cold feet?"

I don't have time to process the last part he said. I slam his back so hard to the wall that a picture falls off and shatters.

“If you value what little of a life you have, you might consider thinking before you speak to me.” The binding on my arm is glowing red on Vael's face and burns like hell as I hold Vael by the throat. I know I'm not supposed to harm any of King Maerek's men, or this dark magic clock finishes sooner. I could feel the binding growing up my arm slowly.

He holds his hands in surrender as his feet dangle below. There is blood now on my fingers still wrapped around his throat, nails cutting in. He croaks, “I'm sorry. I didn’t mean…” I release him. He is gasping for breath as he chokes out, “I didn’t mean to lose my patience and for that I am truly sorry. I worship King Maerek and only wish to see his needs fulfilled.”

I think about explaining it to this idiot. About the dragon that had been circling the royal ward for eleven days and had not left her side for more than an hour at a stretch. About what a Touched's power surge actually looks like when you triggered vs the knowledge the king left me with. He told me enough to know we did not want that happening. I am focused on the binding wrapped on my wrist moving up my forearm and what it costs me every day I stay in Cadryn and the cost if I came back without her. There is a very narrow path between those two outcomes that require patience I do not naturally possess.

I don’t explain it to him. Vael knows the parameters of the mission. He is choosing not to think about them because they are inconvenient.

"She cannot be frightened," I emphasize. "She cannot feel trapped. She cannot be taken by force without the dragon knowing, and if the dragon knows, then we all lose. Do you understand me?"

Vael stands quivering an inch from my face still backed against the wall.

"She has to come willingly." I slowly back up and turn toward the fire. "Which means she has to trust me. Which means I need time. Which means I am taking her to the human ward in a carriage tomorrow with Henrix. This is the first thing in days that gives me a way in that doesn’t end with her dragon burning everything to the ground."

A longer quiet.

"The king is not patient," Vael argues.

"The king," I challenge, "is also not here."

I leave to my room before he can find an answer to that.

The binding is settling now. I remove my shirt to see the mark has grown a bit reminding me the king does not need to be here to be present. And, I am running out of time.

I have approximately a year. Maybe less.

I need to move faster.



She is already at the square when I arrive.

I had not expected that. I had expected her to be late because all the women in Cadryn’s royal ward are late. Deliberately, precisely, as a statement about their own importance. She stands near the carriage with a single bag at her feet, two birds on the wall above her, still and bright against the morning stone. Birds scatter when people move near them but they do not. She watches the shop keepers move about the square with a calm posture and has no idea she is about to get in a carriage with her future kidnapper.

She looks up when I come into her sightline. A small nod and a slight smile. Nothing more.

I match it.

Henrix arrives twelve minutes later with an apology and a warm smile. Rynn receives both with the gracious ease of a woman who has all the time

in the world. Her eyes stay soft, posture open, and not a single line of her face betrays that those twelve minutes are inconveniencing her.

The carriage is not large. With the three of us inside, it is a tight fit. I set up the arrangement for the carriage with only Henrix and me in mind. Henrix drops into the forward-facing seat without asking. The move of a man who has never once in his life entered a room and wondered where he is allowed to sit. Rynn settles beside him, which puts her directly across from me.

She has needlework out of her bag within ten minutes.

Needlework. I arch an eyebrow at her. I would never have guessed.

She sets it in her lap and her shoulders relax, chin tilted down, and she looks to all the world like a woman who finds this deeply satisfying. The moment on the ridge keeps entering my mind. About three men and the dagger that never once hesitated. I look at the needlework. I look at her hands moving through it. I wonder if she has the dagger now and if she has ever used that needle to do more than stitch.

As soon as we get to the outer ward, not even twenty minutes into the ride, Henrix fills the silence either because he can't sit with his own thoughts for too long or he really feels Rynn is interested. Rynn listens with her eyes on the fabric and answers when he addresses her, and every answer lands warm and specific and interested. She is good at it. Too good at it, the kind of good that only comes from years of practice.

About two hours out, Henrix shifts his weight and stretches his arm across the back of the seat. His hand comes to rest near her shoulder. His eyes stay on me as if we are still talking. His fingers drift one inch closer to her arm.

I watch his fingers.

"Henrix," I cut him off. "Come sit over here. I want to go through the contact details before we arrive."

He looks at me with piercing blue eyes and pauses.

"The approach," I insist. "I want to know what we're walking into." I keep my gaze pinned on him daring to refuse. I lift my chin pushing my storm back down inside me before it becomes noticeable how close I am to calling it forward.

Something moves behind his eyes, there and gone, a door opening and closing fast. Then he smiles, wide and unbothered, keeping low, he slowly crosses over to the rear-facing seat and leans himself in the corner, slinging

his elbow up on the back of our seat. His back to the road, his eyes stay on me with a sly, smug smile.

Rynn looks up from her needlework as if just now noticing the change.

Her eyes meet mine and her expression gives me nothing. Not irritation, not amusement, not acknowledgment that anything had just happened. She holds it for two seconds and then looks back down.

She works three more rows patiently waiting for Henrix to continue to quest to get in her pants.

Then she sets the needlework in her lap and turns to the window. I can see her tighten her lips, holding back her words. Is her perfect image going to break? I watch her patiently, curious if she will say something about my obvious discomfort in Henrix with her.

The landscape has changed while Henrix talks. The red rock is now gone. The terrain has flattened out, the scrub thinning, and far out on the horizon the sky is sitting differently above the land: lower, hazier. In the distance, it looks like water is upon the sand.

"You're not what I expected," she finally spits out, turning her head to me.

I wait.

"A merchant," she adds.

"What did you expect?" I draw out my words slowly.

She turns from the window to answer and the afternoon light comes through the glass directly catching her face and I see them properly for the first time.

Amber eyes. Not like any I have seen before. It’s as if there is a fire actively burning in her irises trying to burst out as her face is the perfect picture of poise. Her poise is the most dangerous thing about her. Whatever taught her to hold that still, I doubt it was gentle.

"I'm not sure yet," she admits. And picks up the needlework.

I let it go.

She is not a door that opens if you knock harder. I’ve worked that out over these many days here. She will open on her own schedule, for her own reasons, and the only way to get a peek inside, is to be standing there when she does. I can tell she wants to ask questions but maybe Henrix’s proximity prevents that. Good. I don’t like talking more than I have to. Especially to someone I need to take.

The inn comes into view at dusk. A single low building, warm light in the windows, the smell of something cooking with woodsmoke, reaching the

road before we reach the gate. Henrix goes inside to handle the rooms. I stay and see to the horses.

Rynn stands in the courtyard with her bag at her feet.

In the time it takes me to hand off the horses, she’s already clocked every door, the stable entrance, the road north and south, the height of the courtyard wall, and the innkeepers’ wife coming out to welcome us. At which point her chin lifts and her shoulders open, smiling like a woman who had been doing nothing but enjoying the evening air.

Henrix comes back out as the innkeeper's wife leads her in, telling her something about dinner. Rynn agrees warmly and goes inside with them.

I stand in the courtyard a few minutes more breathing in the deep dry desert air looking up to the massive beast flying above us, circling. How am I going to gain her trust and how do I get her to Korreth without her dragon's attention…

OceanofPDF.com



CHAPTER FIVE

Rynn

The inn is still dark when I wake.

Not fully dark. The soft grey that comes before dawn, when the black has thinned enough that shapes return but color hasn't. I slept in my clothes with my dagger under the pillow, my boots on the floor two inches from my right. For a moment I just lie here listening to the building breathe. Floorboards settling. Wind off the flatlands finding every gap in the window frame the way sand always does, as though the desert were reminding you it hadn't agreed to let you stay.

I take a deep breath and sit up. Nox is already awake. I feel him through the bond.

The path was cleaned. He declares it the way he says most things... as if he were reporting on the weather.

I pull on my boot. *What path?*

The two men you decided to let live on the ridge. For a reason I cannot fathom.

I falter at tying my laces.

Nox... did you eat them?

I was hungry. He pauses. *And they didn't deserve your mercy.*

Fair point, actually. I have made worse decisions for dumber reasons. Three days he waited to tell me this and delivered this information in the same tone he uses to tell me about the relative merits of goat meat versus horse. More juicy, he had told me once, unprompted. I shut that conversation down quick.

I exhale slowly through my nose and finish with my boot.

I don't respond. Who am I to argue with a dragon? I know Nox, but in the eight years since bonding with him, he has never had to kill anyone that I know of. This is new territory with him. There's about as much written record of dragons as there is of the Touched. None.

No dragon has been seen in over five hundred years, not until Nox. What happened to the rest of them, nobody really knows. He doesn't talk about it much either, only that he left to search for me the day I was born, and hasn't been back in twenty-six years. The only knowledge there is to find about dragons anymore is in stories fathers tell children to keep them in line, half of them are probably wrong, all of them told by people who never once saw a real one.

He was probably right anyway. Somewhere in the back of my mind I could feel Helen's ghost registering its disapproval. The woman I spent my last childhood years with had never left a loose end in her life and had made sure I never did the same. I had let those men live anyway. Some habit from a softer version of myself that I hadn't fully burned out yet.

Nox had handled it.

I went to the basin.

The water is warm from the heat the sun gave off the day before. I splash my face, dry it, and take out my paints from the inner pocket of my pack to start applying my adara. Three small bone pots, a fine brush worn down to a third of its original length, a twist of cloth for blending. I have been using the same pots for several weeks now and they were running low but not empty yet.

I work in the dark by feel, which I can do because I have been doing this since I was old enough to be trusted near the pigments. Two diagonal lines crossing my right cheekbone, sharp-edged, iron black. The cluster of dots above my eyebrow line in copper clay, four, evenly spaced, the fifth one smaller, slightly lower. I had never decided to make it that way. I was just experimenting when I was younger to find my look, and this is the one that stuck. The copper reads brown in low light and enhances the red coloring of my eyes in the sun. That part I had decided on.

I take the charcoal last. Ground fine, pressed into a small flat tin. I line both eyes with it, upper and lower, close to the lash line, enough that it would hold through the day. It is the one part of adara that requires a steady hand and I have a steady hand. The charcoal deepened everything else,

made the copper dots pull forward, made my eyes look like something you'd think twice about meeting directly.

Gold powder at my temples, pressed in with the pad of my thumb. The last of the first pot.

I am headed to the human ward and in the low market, the paint would mark me as a royal in Cadryn before I opened my mouth, which was a different kind of liability than gold jewelry but a liability nonetheless. But being back here, I am already feeling a fight ready to come out of me. I fight with my breathing to calm myself, and convince myself I am wearing my fabulous adara paint not to show off that I made it to the top, should I run into anyone from my past life, but because it makes me proud I am no longer suffering like I was as a child at the hands of these people. At least that's what I tell myself. Liability or not, some things are worth the risk.

I left my gold and white hair clasps at home, no need when traveling. I could travel light everywhere except my face. That much I refuse to give up. They only ever hid us little witches out of fear of the king, and underneath that fear was something closer to disgust, because we were different and different was the one thing they could never forgive. I spent years learning to hide that I was different, making myself small enough to disappear. I am not hiding today. They will not feel it coming the way a witch would, but something older than magic still lives in people, and some part of them will know anyway. Let them look, and let them be the first one to look away and feel small and insignificant in the face of what they couldn't kill.

I braid my hair, two small ones at my left temple, one larger braid down my back, loose enough to come undone fast if I needed my binding rope that's holding my braid together for whatever reason. Just in case. We will arrive at the coast in a couple of hours and the nerves are itching under my skin. I pull on the rust linen top, the gold band for my waist, shake the travel dust out of the skirt, and check my dagger is secure at my thigh. Pulling on the shawl around my shoulders, I head downstairs.



The road south is flatter. The red rock of Cadryn's high country is long gone, giving way to something lower and more open here, the scrub thinning to dry grass, the horizon spreading wide and pale in the early light, heat already pressing through the glass. The land looks like it had been pressed flat by something very large a long time ago.

Families slowly start to trickle past us and move along both edges of the road, heading the opposite way we are, toward Cadryn. Not travelers or merchants with something to sell but people carrying whatever they can manage. Bundles wrapped in cloth, a chair balances wrong on someone's shoulder, one man drags a trunk through the dirt because he has nothing left to carry it with. Children ride on hips, on shoulders, tied to backs with whatever scrap of fabric is available. None of them are crying. That's the part that stays with me. Children that young should be crying, and instead they've already learned how to hold still through something too big for them, faces flushed and sun-red, parents holding out fabrics over small heads instead of protecting their own, choosing their children's skin over theirs without a second thought.

Round ears, all of them, as far as I can see. No Woken walking the road. Whatever happened, it happened to people who look like me.

Their clothes tell me more of this odd situation unfolding as we ride by in the shade of our carriage. Torn in places that aren't decorative, the kind of tearing that comes from running. Dirt ground so deep into fabric it stops being dirt and starts being color. A woman near the front of a small cart has a burn along one forearm, unbandaged, angry and red, and she carries it as if it's not there. No attention to it, just a face stuck in determination.

I don't know where they've come from. I have a guess and can see vividly in my mind's eye, my parents.

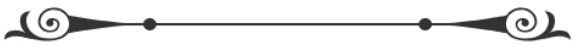
An old woman walks closer to our window when the carriage slows for a bend in the road. She doesn't look away the way most people do when a royal carriage passes. She looks directly in, at Alaric first, then at me, and holds it a beat longer than is comfortable for either of us, lips peeled by the sun. I see the silent accounting happening behind her eyes. Whatever she is looking for in our faces, I don't know if she finds it but she looks away first.

Henrix sleeps through all of it, head against the window, mouth slightly open, entirely undisturbed by a road full of broken people who have lost everything, walking past inches from where he dreams about nothing.

I look at Alaric. He is already looking at me.

Neither of us says anything. There's nothing we can give them. No space in the carriage. No food or water worth sparing against a road this long. Just guilt, sitting thick in my chest, and when I look at Alaric, his jaw is set hard enough that I know it's sitting in his too.

I think of my parents on a road exactly like this one, twenty-three years ago, two daughters at that point plus whatever they could carry, walking toward a kingdom they'd been told might let them live as themselves.



Henrix is in good spirits when he wakes. He seems to always be in good spirits and I have begun to find it faintly exhausting.

I take the needlework out but I don't do anything with it yet. My mind keeps drifting toward the shaman I will seek out in the low market. Not what I would ask for per se. I don't know which specific item I need exactly and that was the problem. Witches work with what you bring them. Herbs, intent, a specific request. You came to a witch knowing what you wanted and left with a version of it. Shamans were different. Shamans work with what you were. What you carry. You don't bring them what you need, they already know. They tell you what you need and what it will cost you. But they are not after riches. No. They get paid in memories, things you hold dear or traumas that make you. Things you haven't looked at in years and thought you had successfully buried but they see it anyway... all of it. They tell you what their price is.

That was why kings want them dead. A shaman who looks at you clearly enough can see your fear before you'd named it yourself. Can see what you'd do to protect what matters most. Can see, with that same unhurried certainty, exactly what it would take to make you do it.

The king's face when I mentioned the fabric. The empty guard stares. The Drenoch Kingdom expanding north and a ruler who looked like a man already bracing for impact. I have not survived this long by waiting for confirmation. I trust my intuition because that's what kept me alive.

I need to know what was possible. What can be done for two children whose power hasn't surfaced yet but is coming. I can feel it in my soul like

a strike of lightning about to hit. Something building. Something that would make them visible in the worst possible way at the worst possible time.

Tavon and Lyra will not be collateral damage. They will not be caught in the crossfire of kings and kingdoms and whatever was brewing between them. Whatever the shaman cost me... I will pay it. They are not going to inherit my scars.

I start to move the needle and start a row when a smell comes through the window.

Dry wood and something green underneath it. Desert sage, the kind that grows in the lower country where the soil holds more water than it looks like it could. I have not smelled it in years. Not since the house in the second ward, the one with the broken step on the back stairs that I had never learned to avoid, the one where I had sat on the roof at nineteen watching the stars with a man who had found me naked after murdering a man and regardless, decided I was worth his time. That was before the king set us up in the royal ward, closer to him.

Gael had liked the sage. He had said once that it smelled like the earth reminding you it was still alive. He taught me how to see the beauty around us, not just the pain.

My heart flutters with the intake of breath as this ache involuntarily comes. I press the thought down flat before it can open any further.

It comes back anyway. Not the whole memory, just a piece of him.

Early twenties now. His fingertips on my back when I couldn't sleep. Not soft. Deliberate. The slow drag of a man who had learned exactly where to go and moved like he had nowhere else to be. Like water finding its way across my skin. I had known hands my whole life. I had not known them like that. Even years of being together, there was still something in my body that flinched when he would reach across our bed and gently caress my skin but four years in, it eventually started to quiet.

I continue my needlework in silence as I try to think about anything else. The pain is too much to relive while I am in this tight space with two strangers.

The thread pulls tight. I keep my eyes on it but without seeing it as my eyes glaze over.

There had been a pregnancy and then there had not been. Before Tavon and Lyra. What I remember is that we did not sit in the silence of it. We could not. Before the baby was even cleaned, when we should've heard a

wail instead of silence, Gael started talking about a trip we had taken once. The food we had eaten. A specific thing I had ordered. The air there. How different it had felt to breathe it. Details. Small, ordinary, beloved details that were real to us. This room, what was happening next to us with the nurse maid, was not real. I instantly transported to that trip we were on and followed him there without question, both of us talking about something beautiful while something unbearable was happening next to us, because we could not hold both things at once and the beautiful one was the only thing keeping us from dying.

I had not thought about that in a long time.

The memories come whether I invite them or not. That is the thing about shamans, even the idea of one was enough to start accounting. They work with what you carry inside. Which means some part of me is already preparing for what they will take. Sorting through what was mine. What I could hand over. What I could not.

The carriage slows and through the window the scrub has given way to low buildings, packed together. The human ward.

I put the needlework away.



We stop at the edge of the ward's main road where the Woken did their business with the humans. A strip of shops and transaction points that existed at the precise boundary between two worlds that were not supposed to mix and mixed constantly anyway. Henrix climbs out first, already scanning for his contact. Alaric comes out behind him and turns to offer his hand as I step down.

I move without taking it and give him a kind smile while lifting my chin.

"The seamstress is just off the common road," I offer, adjusting the strap of my bag. "She only opens at three and your meeting is at five which gives us both time."

"I can come with you," Alaric quips. His eyes move down the common road and back to my face. They do not linger on the road. They came back too fast to look at me intensely.

"To a seamstress appointment?" I question, dripping my words in sarcasm. Ensuring his suggestion to come is ridiculous.

He looks at me and lowers his head slightly. "To the human ward."

"I grew up in human wards." The irritation flies out before I can stop it, surprising even me. I haven't told anyone but Gael in eight years, haven't so much as admitted I know what the human ward looks like, let alone that I was raised in one. I move past it fast. "I know how they work. I will meet you both back here after your meeting for supper."

I smile at Henrix, who is already heading inside, and roll my eyes the second I turn to follow him. Why would I hand a piece of my past to some obvious warrior playing merchant, badly? Sometimes the mask slips when there's this much posturing in the room, all of it aimed at a woman they've already decided is simple-minded and harmless.

The inn Henrix has arranged is on the main road, close enough to the ward's edge that you can smell the salt water from the upper window. I take my room without comment, set my bag on the bed, and sit with the quiet for a moment.

Two and a half hours later and I am itching to get this over with and get back home to my children. I reorganize the items in my pack, removing everything. I only take the clothes I'll wear for the lower market, roll them tight, and push them to the bottom of the bag. I resheath my dagger back in its holster on my thigh and take a breath before leaving to find Nox.



Nox is where I told him to be. Past the last building on the ward's western edge where the desert opens up and nobody walks without a reason. He is low to the ground when I find him, which he does when he tries to be less visible and for a creature his size means he looks exactly the same. I've tried to tell him before to sit up cause he is not fooling anyone but he insists it works.

I change behind his wing removing my fancier dress and setting it aside to put on the color of the desert at midday. A sand-toned wrap that drapes from my shoulders and cinches at the waist, loose enough to move in, the hood pulls forward and a smaller piece attached comes around to cover my

hair and most of my face below the eyes. The arm wraps next, wound from wrist to elbow. Boots already on and my dagger visible at the thigh where the wrap splits, I place a hand on Nox feeling him breathe slow and deep. I take from him his stillness and attempt to calm my nerves.

I step out from behind his wing.

He looks at me.

You look like the desert swallowed you, he teases.

Good, that's exactly the point.

The common road was narrower than the main strip. The shop fronts here were set up with boards and hanging cloth rather than carved stone. The goods are displayed outside on tables rather than behind glass. People sold what they had. Some of it was food, some of it was labor, some of it was harder to name.

I move through it without stopping. Head up, eyes forward, the walk of a woman who knew where she was going and had been in worse places and did not require assistance. It works in any ward in any kingdom. Confidence was the only currency that crossed every border.

The human ward at the coast looks worse than the last time I was here. Or I've just been spoiled for too long living in the royal ward. The buildings are lower here, pressed together and the people inside them had not chosen where to live. Rats in a cage, forced to stay wherever there was space. Everything seems so much smaller than before. The streets are unpaved past the first two rows of commerce and the smell of salt water mixed with mold and urine. People move with their eyes down because looking up costs something they cannot afford.

I had grown up in this place.

The smell hits before the memory does. Burning skin, rot and something underneath both of those. My tongue feels dry in my mouth, the taste of dirt strong and making my stomach turn. Worms tasted like chewy dirt and they gave almost no fight once you knew to bite them fast. I knew that at nine. I knew which gutters ran cleaner after rain and which family threw out bread still good enough to eat if you got to the bin before the rats did.

I keep walking. My face stays exactly where I put it.

Sylla left when I was eight. We were only a year and a half apart and I felt we were like twins up until our parents died. She was my best friend. It was morning, and there was a note nobody had taught her to write well, and then nothing. She was nine. I did not understand until years later. At first I

was confused and heartbroken like I was falling into a dark neverending pit and couldn't find my way out. But then I got older and anger took the place of confusion. I was the one being the sole big sister to Calla. Protecting her above all else. Sylla was a coward. A selfish coward who decided being the oldest witch in the family now was not going to be her responsibility. Decided Calla and I weren't worth the effort as long as she got free of this place.

There was a winter. There is always a winter, in memories like this, the way there is always a knife in a story about a killing. I gave Calla the blanket because Calla was smaller and cried less when she was warm... my smallest toe went black within the week, and there was no one to care enough to do anything about it. So, I wrapped it and waited weeks before it finally fell off on its own. I didn't even feel it happen and never told anyone why I limped that spring.

Donnie kept a paddle by the door. He used it on Calla first, when she was still small enough to fit under one arm. I tried to stop him the one time I was fast enough to get between them, and he slammed me against the wall for it. I don't remember most of what came after. I remember Calla's skin when I woke up, the bruises already going purple and her unable to sit down with the dried blood sticking to her pants pulling at her skin when she tried to move.

After that, I padded her. Doubled and tripled every scrap of underwear either of us owned, hers and mine both, layered under her dress before he ever called her name, so the wood would land on cloth instead of skin. I took mine bare every time, gladly, because a five-year-old should not know what a paddle feels like slapped against skin.

The families in that ward knew what we were. Unregistered. Witches, same as our parents, and no papers to make it legal. They hated that they couldn't report it without questions turning back on themselves. So they said nothing, and did what they wanted with us instead, and called it discipline or tough love because nobody official was ever going to stop them.

I do not let myself finish that memory all the way to the end, not here, not walking down a street with only three and a half hours to return to the inn and a shaman to find.

You have gone very quiet and I feel your heart pounding. His voice pushes through our bond, careful, from somewhere above the rooftops.

I am fine.

You are not.

I am focused. There is a difference. Both true but neither one shows on my face, because that is the only skill from this street that ever did me any good.

Rynn... His voice pushes hard into my mind with no room for me to argue.

I know. I send back before he can finish.

I can smell them. Not specifically. But this ward has a quality to it that I recognize from your memories and it's hard to control myself here. I want you to know that I am—

Nox.

—watching everything.

You will not burn anything down.

A pause that managed to convey, without a single word, that he does not agree to that.

I mean it. Now I push back, all my anger coming to the surface. *I didn't survive this place to watch you level it on my behalf. If anyone is going to take this place out, it's me.*

You were a child here. His voice was very quiet now, angry. *What was done to you here was done to a child.*

I know what I was. I adjust the strap of my bag and keep my face exactly where I need it. *I am not that anymore. And if I run into any of them today, I will handle it. Not you.*

He is silent for a long moment.

You are considerably more dangerous than you were then. He adds, agreeing. *And you have grown into a woman who your younger self would run to for protection. Remember who you are.*

Yes. I choke down the emotion that tries to break through.

Well that's enough of that. I am The Touched now and they are still human. I announce more to myself. *Stay close and stay quiet and do not eat anyone unless I say so.*

He doesn't respond but the warmth in our bond increases, pulsing pure love and focusing entirely on me. That was as close to agreeing as Nox ever got.

It's an odd sensation not having eyes on you before you even make a noise. The humans can't feel power the way Woken can and I feel I get my

stealth edge back for the first time in many years.

Nox, how far to the low market edge from here?

Two streets south. Then west along the wall until the road ends. He pauses. *There is something else.*

I keep walking. *There is always something else with you.*

The girl. His voice has taken a hard turn. *On your left. Against the post.*

I don't turn my head but I move my eyes.

She looks to be maybe fourteen or sixteen. Sitting against a post at the edge of a stall selling rope and ironwork, her wrists bound to it with a cord that has enough slack to let her sit but not enough to stand. Her clothes are disgusting. A stained mess of what appears to be dried blood, mud and possibly vomit. Her hair is matted on the left side where something had hit her recently enough that the swelling hasn't finished. She is looking at the ground with stillness. Trying not to bring attention to herself.

She has power. Nox assesses. *Suppressed so far down she may not know it is there. But I can smell it.*

I keep walking.

Rynn.

I have a shaman to find and three and a half hours. I am not taking on a human ward problem today. I snap through the bond firmly.

She is a witch. He bites out. *Like your parents were.*

I stop walking.

I stand in the middle of the common road with people moving around me on both sides and I look at the ground for three seconds and think about a girl on a street corner at seventeen with nowhere to go and a family she doesn't have. A world that had given her nothing but reasons to make herself small.

I think about Gael stepping between me and a decision I would not be able to take back.

I am not Gael. I force back to Nox.

No. He states. *You are not.*

I start walking again. Toward the low market. Away from the girl against the post. The weight of Nox's silence follows me the entire way.

As the street continues with humans buying and trading on the market road, my focus is finding the shaman, finding the low market but then I see her. She is sitting on the ground outside a random doorway washing clothes in a large soapy bucket, water splashing out as she pulls the clothes up and

down. I stop dead in my tracks, my feet refusing to move as if held strong by quicksand.

Greta. Older now. Smaller than I remember her being, though I was ten and everyone was larger than me then. The lines in her face have gone deep enough to hold shadow even in daylight.

She turns her head up to me and puts a thick gnarled hand up to shade her eyes from the sun. She does not recognize me. There is no reason she should, I realize. My feet refuse to move on command. For a moment, there is some current running underneath a decision, I feel it pounding in my chest and before I have a choice, my words are out. My tongue feels like knives ready to throw.

"You don't remember me," I bite out.

She focuses her eyes now, needle stilling. Confusion first. Then something older and darker moves in behind it.

"Should I?"

Hearing her voice instantly injects ice cold water into my veins. "Two girls. Several years ago. Under your care."

Something crosses her face. Recognition, arriving slow, the specific look of someone doing math they would rather not finish.

"The witch girls," she says, quiet, and there is a flicker of something underneath it that is not quite guilt. Closer to conviction, still intact after all these years, the certainty of someone who has never once doubted she was right.

My voice now hard, "Yes." I say hard and low, drawing out the word.

"You were possessed," she states. Not a question. Not an apology either. "I don't expect a demon to remember its own deliverance."

I do not answer right away.

Some things a body keeps in a place words cannot reach quickly. The taste of broth, only broth, for three weeks, thin and brown and never enough, while my stomach folded in on itself. My hands started shaking too badly to hold the spoon steady, and Greta called the shaking proof, my demonic needs revealing themselves rather than hunger. The dirt she pressed into my eyes with her thumbs, telling me demons could not see through blinded eyes, and how it took me three days of scraping at my own face before I trusted my own vision again.

The small blade she kept for it specifically, thin cuts along the inside of my arm where my sleeve would hide them, to let the witch blood out, she

said, like blood was a door and I had not been opened correctly yet. That dark room with no window where she locked me in for days when the praying did not work fast enough for her patience. I slept in my shit and piss because she would not open the door for anything, not even that, especially not that... because a demon soiling itself was one more thing to pray over.

Calla she never touched. Calla was seven and quiet and had never once, in Greta's accounting, looked at her the way I apparently did, some flicker in a seven-year-old's face that Greta decided was innocent where the same flicker in mine was proof of my evil.

I was ten. I knew I was not a demon as she claimed but not being able to prove it was its own kind of dying. Nothing I said or did could make it stop. I was a ghost or rather a rag doll with its lips sewn shut.

"I was not possessed," my voice comes out even but hard. I am almost proud of that, distantly, the way you are proud of a hand that does not shake while everything else in you is shaking. "I was a child. Hungry, and later sick, because you decided broth alone would starve out something that was never there to begin with."

"The Woken are wrong about you being the Touched," her voice is sharp now, sure of herself in the specific way of people who have spent a lifetime building a single fact into a cathedral. "They call it a gift. It is not a gift. It is a door left open, and something always comes through an open door eventually." Her hands have gone still in the water. "I was trying to save you."

"You cut me for three weeks and called it deliverance."

"I would do it again." No hesitation in that. None at all. "I would do it again tomorrow, to any child brought into my house with that look in their eyes, because a soul saved is worth more than a body's temporary discomfort."

Something is building behind my sternum that has nothing to do with words and everything to do with the years underneath them.

She opens her mouth to say more. I do not find out what, because the heat arrives.

Starting somewhere low, it wells up inside of me. Somewhere that still remembers exactly what dirt tastes like and the feel of not having a voice because of your youth. As if a child doesn’t know when their body cannot take more.

The low shrubs against the wall behind her turn toward me, every leaf angling in the same direction as if given the chance, it would pull away from the ground and fly through the air to stick on me. Someone's laundry line goes taut and then slack, though there is no wind. Greta's wet hands come out of the water and land at her sides into the dirt. She starts coughing... coughing up dirt. I can hardly see through my anger. My only thought is to bury her, crush her. I know the brown coloring in my eyes have gone red at the edges. The last time I felt my power rise up was to protect Calla; now it’s to defend the little girl I was who didn’t have a protector. I feel the burn on my spine crawl up my shoulders.

Rynn. Nox calmly states my name the way you would alert others to a desert cat, quiet but urgent. He is somewhere above the rooftops. *Something is happening.*

I know.

You are not in control of it.

I know that too.

I try to pull my power back but it does not want to go. I am so angry and want her to pay. People have started to gasp and stand back, creating a semi circle around my backside. Greta falls over on her side now trying to gasp for breath, blood mixing with the wet dirt she is now throwing up. It takes longer than it should, and some small, ugly part of me resents having to, because for one full second I understand with total clarity that I could make her feel exactly what dirt tastes like, and some part of me that has been ten years old for sixteen straight years thinks that would be nothing less than fair.

Justice is well deserved here Rynn but you are killing her. I love you and I see you, you are not alone anymore. Nox is pushing intense all consuming love down the bond and my anger starts to dissipate. Greta instantly stops coughing up dirt and spits leftover gravel onto the ground while sitting up.

Greta has gone very still, one hand pressed flat to her own chest and for the first time since I’ve known this cruel woman, I see fear in her eyes instead of certainty, and there is a small, cold part that still seeks justice. I don’t know how to use my power but it seems like anger and thought have a lot to do with it. I imagine the pain I felt when she broke my rib at eleven, she kicked me uncontrollably when I threw up her fucking broth and left me bleeding on the floor. I narrowed my gaze to her and a loud *CRACK* had her screaming, grabbing her rib.

I don’t even listen to the humans running around screaming for the Watch to come because I know they won’t. Even back then they didn’t come, only the king’s guards hours later.

The fire in me settles. My hands are shaking harder than they should. "I was never possessed," I say, once I trust my own voice again. "You starved a child and called it faith. That is the whole of what happened in your house, and no amount of prayer will save you from your actions."

I turn and walk away, the crowd parting for me as I leave.

I see every piece you've buried and I love you there too.

He pushed warmth through my body replacing my old scarred heart with unconditional love. I couldn't stop my fists from shaking as I walked down the road and only allowed a single tear to fall before I responded to him.

I love you too.



The low market was a settlement pressed against the outer wall of the human ward on the side that faced away from the coast, low buildings built from whatever had been available when they were built and repaired with whatever was available after that. No straight lines. No planned roads. The whole thing had the look of something that had grown rather than been constructed.

The entrance was a gap in the wall wide enough for two people. A male sat in a chair beside it with his arms crossed, legs out and his eyes tracking everything that passes without moving his head. He has a knife on his belt and the posture of someone who has held this spot for a long time and intends to keep it that way. His Woken sharp ears have holes from the tip to the lobe that are pierced with a sword earring threading in and out each hole as if it was embedded in his ear. Clothes are ripped up and dirty but with his black ink running up his neck and down his arms, I can't really focus on the clothes. His eyes are entirely black. Iris and pupil are the same, no color, no distinction between them, just dark all the way through.

He looks at me when I come to the gap and scowls hard, focusing on my facial paint.

I look back at him with a pleasant face and wait.

"Ward business or other." His tone has no room for fun. Not a question I realize but a sorting mechanism.

"Other," I respond, keeping my voice light.

His eyes move down my clothes and back up. Taking inventory. I dressed carefully for this. Nothing that announced the royal ward, nothing with gold, plain clothes and my hair down without braiding. Just the adara around my eyes which wouldn't necessarily give my status away but does show I have means. I look like a woman with money who was trying not to look like a woman with money, which was exactly what most people who come here look like and therefore unremarkable. He shifts uncomfortably, possibly feeling the power wave off of me. I push the flap of my bag open to show I have money and am ready to buy whatever services I need in the low market. He looks at it for a moment and then moves his legs aside and lets me through without another glance.

Inside is darker than outside the pass. Broken-down storefronts built into the walls of this mountain pass with shadowed alleyways running alongside some shops. Smells of cookfires, animals, and bodies that haven’t seen a shower in a long time. There is also a sharpness of something medicinal underneath all of it. The paths between other shops are packed dirt, worn smooth and slightly concave from years of feet.

I walk slowly down the narrow dirt path and feel a sense of familiarity with it. There are three women showcasing their goods in an attempt to entice any onlookers. I have no issue seeing their nakedness but attempt to steer around them without notice when one woman gently puts her hand on my shoulder and presses her tits against my arm. "Looking for a good time? I can make you scream like no man ever could," she whispers in my ear. I quietly give my thanks for the offer but no thanks as I keep walking. Tempting offer, genuinely, if I had any time at all today for a woman to make me forget my own name.

Nobody seems surprised at my presence, their interest is more about if I will buy from them. Several people offer me the best elixir to make all my dreams come true or a pill that will allow me to manipulate time, blades that will read my intentions and cut down an ex-lover without me being present. There are Woken and human alike sitting on the dirt path attempting to tuck themselves into a wall while hitting up some concoction into their arms and ankles. I move through, trying to spot someone who has a little sense left in them to point me in the right direction.

I stop a witch carrying a bundle of wrapped cloth, who has a patch over her left eye and a massive scar down her right cheek and ask where I can find the shaman.

She looks at my face for a moment. Then she points deeper in, toward the far end of the settlement where the buildings pressed closest together and the light between them was thinnest.

"You'll know the door," she whispers. "It's the one nobody stands near." She walks on and I continue deeper.

She was right about the door. It is set slightly back from the surrounding buildings in a way that gives it a natural margin of empty space. The wood is darker than the buildings on either side, stained with something that had soaked in over years. There are markings carved into the frame at eye level, not decorative. These are carved symbols that I don't understand.

Can you look through my eyes and tell me if you recognize these symbols? I ask Nox

I can feel the pressure build in my head as Nox pushes through our bond. It wasn't comfortable. It's hard to keep my eyes open with his force.

There is a mix of ancient writings of the old Gods and witch symbols. I believe some meanings are to keep things out... He pauses. *But also to keep some things in.*

I stand in front of them for a moment as the pressure releases from behind my eyes and Nox mentally creates space.

Then I raise my hand and knock.

OceanofPDF.com

CHAPTER SIX

Rynn

The door opens before I finish knocking.

She is ancient. Her eyes are piercing. The color seems to be moving like a galaxy with colors of purple, silver, blues and green. I am frozen in place by her stare and know she can see the complete unflinching truth of who I am. There is no performance I could do to hide myself. Through the bond I feel Nox lock. No words. Just that sudden total stillness. Waiting.

Her skin is a map of wrinkles so deep they look carved, and every inch of it that shows beneath her clothing is covered in tattoos. Not the clean decorative ink of the royal ward. These are older. Darker. The kind that have been pressed into skin with intention rather than artistry, symbols layered over symbols until the original marks are nearly lost beneath everything that had been added after. Her hair is grey and silver, falling in thick dreads past her shoulders, wound through with beads and small bones. Pieces of cloth in colors that had long since faded to something gentler than they'd started. She holds smoke between two fingers. The smoke curls upward in a thin line and does not waver.

I step in and shut the door without putting my back to her.

Inside is only one room. Low ceiling, a single window that faces the wall of a building opposite so that almost no light can come through. A fire burns in a pit in the center of the floor, and around the walls are shelves so dense with objects I cannot begin to catalogue them. Bundles of dried things. Jars of dark liquid, skulls, cloth, small carved figures with no faces. The smoke

from her cigar mixes with something else coming from the fire, something sharp and tangy that presses behind my eyes when I breathe it in.

She is on the ground, cross-legged on the floor beside the fire, easy and unhurried. She sets the smoke down and folds her hands in her lap and looks up at me with a knowing smile as if she has been waiting for me.

I sit across from her.

Neither of us speak for several moments.

"You are not what I expected," I finally squeak out.

"You are exactly what I expected," she retorts.

She already knows. The thought moves through me without surprise. Some people read rooms. Some read people. She reads something else entirely and I do not want to know what.

I explain what I need. Protection for my two children. Something that would hold for at least a moon cycle. Long enough to get them somewhere safe.

She listens without moving.

When I finish, she is quiet for long enough that I wonder if she had heard me at all.

"I know what you want," her voice is low and raspy. "I know what you have that is worth the price."

Something in my chest strains.

"Your sister," she breathes. "The memory of her death. You carry it like a stone around your throat." She tilts her head. "I require that trauma."

I can't find the words. My mouth opens to respond but no words are found. I am struck, my brain stops short only thinking of Lyssie.

"I can take it..." The shaman pushes. "You would breathe easier. Your children would have a mother who sleeps."

The words land with terrible gentleness. She genuinely believes she is offering me something kind.

While her voice echoes in my eardrums, I feel the agreement trying to force its way out of me as I attempt to hold it back. Magic I realize, possibly layered into the vibrations of her words.

The pool. At the height of summer. The heat was so thick it sat on your skin like something alive. I still see the slight smile on her face when they pulled her from the water. So soft. So slight. I was certain she was playing. Hair soaking wet, lying face up on the ground surrounded by strangers. My vision tunneled as I fought to get to her. Pulling at several strangers to get

away, ripping hair and grabbing shoulders as they kneeled around her, panicking.

I had screamed at everyone to stop touching her, get away from her. Lyssie was just playing our game. Playing a prank, they were going to hurt her if they pressed on her chest like that. Someone held me back by the shoulders. Someone else was praying and several were choking with tears. I was thrashing out of someone's grip, trying to get around the strangers holding me back. *Wait! She is just playing a trick!* I bellowed over and over but no one heard me… they wouldn't listen. I was a ghost, invisible to the adults around.

We used to play like this all the time, play dead and the other sisters would gather round and lightly tickle your forehead or put their wet finger in your ear, all of us would take turns in fits of laughter. I needed them to hear me but I couldn't get my voice loud enough over the madness unfolding. If they would've just listened, they would know she was fine.They didn't need to panic. I was trying to get a glimpse of her eyes between the ones on their knees around her. *Come on Lyssie, stop this now, you have taken it too far, you're scaring everyone…* I remember thinking, *how did she get so good at holding still?*

Her eyes never opened.

Her tiny four year old body in her water suit lying on the ground. Her too bright, fuchsia suit is piercing and painful in my mind, against the porcelain skin of my blonde-haired baby sister.

I had looked away. Not for long. Not intentionally. I was nine, almost double digits and had been walking with my older sister and cousin around the pool's edge feeling like I was one of the big kids and didn't need to play with the toddlers. That was all it took. One moment of not paying attention. One moment of selfishness.

I have not looked away since.

The shaman watches me move through it. She doesn't rush me.

I think about what it would mean to put it down. To stop carrying the weight of that afternoon. My children would have a mother who was not built entirely from the wreckage of one summer day. That was not nothing. That was not a small thing.

But I knew what I was without it. I had tested the edges of it, debating. The hypervigilance that made other people uncomfortable was the same thing that had kept Tavon and Lyra breathing every day of their lives. I

watch them the way I had not watched Lyssie. I don't look away. I don't get distracted. I don't assume someone else is watching.

If I give this away I might become someone who assumes.

I cannot afford to become someone who assumes.

"No," I force out.

Her face doesn't change as if she expected my response. "You think you need it?"

"I know I need it." My voice comes out dry and certain. "The day I forget what it costs to look away for one second is the day I deserve what happens next."

She studies me for a long moment. Something moves behind her eyes that might have been respect and might have been pity. I do not want either.

"Then I cannot help you." She turns away to grab her smoke, a quiet dismissal.

I had not planned to say it. The words come up from somewhere below thought, below calculation, from a place deep inside where I keep things I never took out. Looking directly into her piercing eyes of crystal blue and silver.

"Gael," The words fly out.

The name sits in the air between us.

"My husband," I clarify. "The memory of what it felt like to be loved by him. Not that he existed. Not that he died. Just---" I stop and try to slow my breathing. I shut my eyes and try to process just for a moment, *be strong... nothing matters but Lyra and Tavon* I internalize. I open my eyes and start again. "The feeling of it, the moments that built our love. Take that."

She sits very still watching me closely.

"You understand what you are offering." she mulls over the offer.

"Yes."

"You will remember his name. His face. His death." Her eyes do not leave mine. "But the warmth of him. The specific weight of being chosen by someone. That will be gone. You will look for it and find nothing."

"I know."

"Most people," she says quietly, "would rather give me their pain."

"Most people," I challenge, "cannot comprehend what life looks like when a child is removed from your life. I have."

She looks at me for a long time. Then she stands, slowly, and crosses the room toward me. She raises both hands toward my face and I force myself

to stay still. I make myself breathe slowly through pursed lips.

Her palms are dry and very cold against my cheeks.

"Close your eyes," she instructs.

I close them.

And I let myself find it one last time. Gael's voice saying my name like it was the most precious word he knew. The way he looked at me when he thought I wasn't watching. The pride in his voice to call me his. The feeling, foreign and real and entirely his, that I was worth looking at, I was worth coming back for after a fight. His incredible mind and gentle hands on my skin, the words that broke through the cold shell around my heart.

I hold it.

And then I feel her take it.

It does not hurt. That is almost worse. It simply... leaves. Like a door closing in a room I would never find again. I stand in the dark behind my eyes and reached out for it only to find the shape of where it had been. A hollow cutout.

Her hands leave my face and when I open my eyes, she is staring not at my eyes but into my soul. A tear falls on my cheek but I don't know why it came.

"It is done." She moves to a shelf along the wall and returns with a small vial, dark glass, stoppered with wax. "Two drops each. No more."

I take it. My hands are steady.

"You loved him," she offers with sadness in her voice.

"Yes." I try to process her words deeper but cannot find meaning. "I remember that I did. I recognize the words but don't remember what that means."

I stand and move my hands slowly down my clothes to remove wrinkles that aren't there. I feel cold inside, empty. I tuck the vial in my pouch and turn. I don't look back at the room. I don't look at the markings on the door frame on my way out. I walk through the low market with my head up, my face composed and I do not stop until I have put three streets between myself and that door.

Then and only then, do I open the bond.

Nox's fury hits me like a wall and I stumble a bit blinking, focusing on gaining control of my emotions again over his.

You shut me out. His voice is tight with anger.

Rynn... what did you do?

I keep walking.

Nothing that cannot be lived with. I state plainly.

He goes quiet.

I had shut him out deliberately. He could not have been in the room for that. He would have felt every moment of it and I needed steady hands and a clear head. Nox's three hundred years of fury unleashed on the shaman, on what was asked of me to give... there would be no more shaman left if he was there.

I know what you did. He bites out finally. *I can feel something is missing in you.* His low growl vibrates my soul.

I say nothing. What is there to say? My decision was made and what's done is done.

You gave him away.

I gave away a feeling... some moments, memories, but he is still mine. I keep my eyes forward barely registering the Woken male with the sword piercing in his ear. I continue walking through the human ward, back to the inn. I am angry. I don't know why but I feel a fire in my chest building quickly. Rage boiling over inside. I need a fight, scream, claw at the rage under my skin.

Nox is quiet for a long time. The warmth in the bond doesn't leave but it changes. Draws closer, as if to put himself between me and something he can't fight.

Don’t lose yourself Rynn. You are strong, you are brave and you are an incredible mother. He gently nudges.

I hear his words but it’s hard to connect to them. I feel like they are a lie but I also know that they are true. It’s hard to think now that I am back in the human ward, knowing those monsters are here. Not ones with green skin and sharp fangs but the ones who have human skin. All five homes I was in were each their own kind of evil. On the outside they all appeared to be trying to make it tomorrow like the rest but I got to see what’s really underneath. Their control was taken from them by the king so they sought control where they could. On a child who wasn’t theirs. A child who had different blood than them.

I feel like there is a pit of lava in my heart where his love used to be. I manage. *I don't know anymore what it means to be loved by a partner. But I don't think I needed that love anyways.* The rocks around my feet jump as I

walk. Vibrations of my power pulsing out of my body in waves. I barely register the humans giving me space as I continue down the road.

It's an important part of human nature to connect, feel seen, and be loved. Humans are not solitary creatures. You may think you are fine but you needed him. Needed those moments of joy. Nox states as if to change my mind on something already done.

I know humans better than you Nox. No good comes from letting someone have that much control over your heart. Love is just a leash people agree to wear and call it romance. There are no happy endings. Just stories that haven't ended yet.

Let's ride Rynn. Come to me. Let's go up to the clouds. He changes direction.

I feel a crack in my chest at the pleading in his voice. I am swaying on my feet, eyes heavy. I am almost to the inn not caring that I didn't go back to Nox to change into my royal clothing.

He forces his vision into mine and I see the sky without obstruction. There is a tug in my chest calming my rage and replacing it with a need to escape. Without making the choice, my legs turn me in the direction of Nox.

When I see him in the distance, I harden myself and attempt to build those bricks I so long ago broke down. I don't want to share my pain, I don't want to feel this darkness.

Tears are caught in my throat as I try to stand strong and emotionless.

When I reach Nox, he instantly whips out his tail to circle around me, forcing my legs to move closer into him. He flares his wing out and encases me in it, putting a barrier between me and the human ward.

I break.

You are not alone and you will not carry this pain alone for as long as I breathe.

I fall in shatters on the dirt ground and feel Nox's presence surrounding me inside and out. I may have lost what it means to be romantically in love, chosen out of all others in the realm to love but I do have Nox. Our bond forces us to be intertwined mind, body and soul and therefore there is no shouldering my pain alone.

I will always see you and you will never hide your heart from me. I want it and love all of what makes you you.

You only say that because you were forced to bond me. It’s not like there are other Touched for you to choose from. I huff a laugh trying to make my words into a joke... it falls short.

That is not true. Any of the dragons could've bonded but I felt you the moment you were born and knew you were mine to hold. Mine to protect and would choose you again and again, fight any dragon or other to be by your side.

I feel pathetic for needing to hear these words but my tears stopped flowing, my anger dissipating bringing back this hollow space in my chest. I need the sky. I slowly climb up Nox’s foreleg and settle into the space behind his neck and hug him tight. *Thank you for wanting me,* I whisper down the bond and Nox takes flight. We are in the clouds within seconds and my head is clearing. Between the love Nox is pushing my way and the energy I feel pulsing into my mark the same way I always do being this far away from the ground, the darkness in me recedes.

We fly along the coast heading west and the colors in the sky are breathtaking. Incredible pinks and purples, golds and white. I think of my two incredible children and my heart aches, I need them in my arms. The sun descends behind the desert plane and we turn back to the inn. It was a short flight today and soon I arrive at my room. I store the precious vial carefully in my adara bag, wrapped in clothing and place it under my pillow. I do not think about what I lost.

I have two children to get home to.

That is enough. That has always been enough.



I fell asleep almost instantly when I came back from the human ward. Hours later now, in the middle of the night, I find myself standing in the darkness of this tiny inn room that smells of old wood and someone else's years, looking out the window. Focusing on the sky once again, feeling the warmth and energy it provides and I can breathe easier. I am tired but I had to see. I woke up with a pull to see the stars over the coast. The view is different than in Cadryn. Lower, somehow. Brighter at the edges and never-ending. The stars engulf me as I get lost in them.

My bag is already packed for the morning. The vial secured and everything ready. Which means there is nothing left to do and nothing left to do was the condition I found hardest to survive.

I stand at the window and gaze at the stars which always help calm the itch under my skin. I think of Tavon and Lyra, about the road back and how long it will take to get back to them. My jaw tightens. If I rode Nox it would be faster but the king would see me flying in the middle of day and want words with me. I don’t need questions.

A knock comes so quietly I almost miss it.

I stay still. Listening to the inn breath around me but then it comes again, two knocks, unhurried, near silent.

I debated going, feeling it hard to move away from the sky. I know who it is before I open it.

Alaric fills the doorframe completely, his shoulders nearly brushing both sides of the frame, close enough I can feel the heat coming off him before he says a word. I hadn't noticed what he was wearing earlier, too locked into what waited for me with the shaman to spare him a second thought. I notice now. His dark jacket from the carriage is open, the sleeves pushed back at the forearm where the dark magic sits, angry against his skin. My eyes find the middle of his chest almost instantly.

That's the thing about him. I am shorter than Woken considering I am born of witches, but standing so close to him, his shadow consumes me. He seems larger than the lean and lanky Woken male form. He's a wall of muscle and to look at his eyes I will need to look up, and looking up is a thing I refuse to do on instinct. I am no child. Which means I stand here for exactly one second staring at the tight fabric of his shirt revealing the body of a warrior before I take a step back to look into his eyes so I don’t need to raise my head. I narrow my eyes slightly at his, forcing myself not to look back down at his chest.

His hair is loose and rustled like the day couldn't help but leave its mark on him, long enough that he'd usually have it tied back but hasn't bothered tonight. His dark brown curls hang near his eye. It's annoying. I want to move it.

He watches me with those intense blue eyes and the ring of gold around each pupil catches the weak light of the corridor. I am lost in them, entirely gone, swimming in the swirls that move around the gold. His eyes move down my neck so slowly, I feel the caress of them and as his gaze moves

lower, I realize I am exposed. Full exposure happening right now with Alaric's full attention on every part of me. I didn't bring my night gown thinking packing light was best and most nights in the desert it's most comfortable to sleep in simple underwear. Really simple... as in no bra. *Stupid*. The stars took my entire focus when I heard the knock, I didn't think about it. His eyes keep lowering and our breath increases simultaneously. Neither of us saying a word.

I will own this because well, I opened the door like this and that means I obviously, as an adult woman, am aware of what I am wearing. I resist the urge to move behind the door and instead slowly raise my right arm to cover my nips. As I move, his eyes shot up to mine with his eyebrows drawn but his pupils dilated, wide like he was about to reprimand me for being in such a state answering the door. I raise an eyebrow popping out a hip and smirk. Let him try to tell me what to do...

"Lady Rynn," his voice is gruff and low. Like the words themselves are painful.

"It's late," I quip.

"I know." His neck is strained as he speaks and hasn't moved a muscle.

"Then this should be brief."

His eyes spark with intrigue, lips curling into a smile at one corner. He leans one shoulder against the doorframe crossing his huge arms and ankles as if he has all the time in the world. His posture is deliberate and smooth. I recognize it immediately for what it is. The same posture men use when they want a woman to think they are relaxed, because relaxed men are unthreatening and unthreatening men get invited in.

"I wanted to check on you." His eyes are soft. "You didn’t join us for supper and I know the ward can be... difficult."

I take my time answering, watching his performance play out. So this is how he talks his way into ladies' rooms. Tempting, I'll give him that. But Nox already told me what's really underneath all of it and the questions behind why he is really in Cadryn. Whatever he's selling tonight, I'm not buying.

"The ward?" I say, drawing out the last word in question.

"It's not the royal district you are used to. The common road especially." His voice stays warm but questioning. It is odd hearing him use this seductive tone. My ears are hearing one thing but my body is responding

opposite, and I fight to keep my shiver at bay. We have always had simple, short conversations but not ones with warmth or this much intensity.

"Some of the women here have had... unpleasant experiences. I thought you might want---"

"I grew up in lower wards as I told you before, I know how they work." I cut him off, keeping my voice pleasant. I smile soft and delicate, the same smile I use on males to help them forget what we were talking about entirely. I can't stop my head from tilting to the side or one eyebrow from lifting slightly higher than it should.

He catches the attitude in my posture and his eyes shine with challenge. He drops his gaze to the arm covering my chest and I see him take in a sharp breath now that all of the scars on my right arm and stomach are exposed. There is no way for him to know I got these scars from the human ward. His posture changes and slight irritation creeps up his expression. He stands up straight, dropping his arms to his sides holding one in a fist he won't let go of. The corner of his lip pulls tight as if to keep his words in.

"Right," he bites out. "You mentioned that."

"I did." I fold my arms which now push my tits up and together but I can't fix that now or I lose whatever power I think I've gained in this interaction. "Was there something else?"

He looks at me for a moment. Then he shifts, a small shift, his weight moving forward a half-step that brings him closer to the threshold. The corridor light falls differently across his face, and I am suddenly very aware that he is very large and I am very not. Memories try to push forward in my mind as I take a sharp inhale unintentionally. He stops instantly watching me carefully. I recall men who would see a small woman and feel the need to overpower her simply because they could. I remember having no choice but to sit back and let it happen because there was nothing my skinny arms could do to stop it.

"The seamstress shop," he continues. "the one on the common road."

"Yes." I throw the memories away and harden my stance. My dagger is all the way by the bed and I take stock of all the items near me out of habit.

"I passed it this evening on the way to my meeting." His voice is still low but gentle now, careful. "It was closed."

"Ah," I say to fill the silence as I come up with an excuse.

"Closed and dark. The woman next door said the seamstress had been unwell all day. Since before dawn." He holds my gaze. "Nobody had seen

her open."

I let the silence sit for exactly three seconds. I was very good at silences. It's a trick I learned early on that if you don't answer right away, the other person may continue talking, giving you the answer you need. He knows this trick as well, it seems; the silence is stretching too long.

"What a disappointment it was," I sigh dramatically. "I do wish her good health and a speedy recovery." I made my voice high and delicate as I would if we were at a formal dinner. Except I don't have the patience to hide it from my face. My irritation is clear in the tight squint of my eyes as I give my best winning smile and wait a beat.

He stays quiet but raises his eyebrows, nodding at me to continue.

"I found another shop," I add helpfully, flinging one hand around as I talk. "Further along. The fabric is not quite what I needed but it will do until I can arrange a proper fitting back home. Henrix was very patient about my delay for supper last night since I needed to find another shop. He is a remarkably patient man." I lower my voice on the last part and my smile becomes sensual now begging him to keep pushing.

Alaric looks at me hard. I know he is trying to find holes in my story but I have the fabric on the chair just next to us to prove it. The gold ring around his pupils catches the light again and I see the gold swirling. I’m starting to get annoyed that he won't just take my story as I told it.

"A fitting..." he mulls over.

"For a dress," I help him understand like a child. "They are traditionally related."

His jaw tightens barely and if I had not been watching his face with the same attention he was turning on mine, I would have missed it. He steps forward now more confident than before. Just an inch into the room and I refuse to look intimidated by him. I look directly into bright blue eyes as he angles his head down a bit, lifting an eyebrow with a challenge.

My breath quickens, no longer from past fear but rather the proximity of him next to my bare body. His breath tickles the skin at my chest and I shift my legs hiding the clench between my thighs as I do so. My face does not change. He can try all he wants to read between my story but it's not his business and he needs to stop trying to insert himself in it.

"You didn't go to the seamstress," he breathes, hardly any space between us now. His scent is all encompassing as he slides out his tongue to slowly

lick his bottom lip. I watch the movement and want to bite that lip but I don't budge. I won't be the one to break.

"I went to a seamstress," I say slowly. "Different one. Do try to keep up."

"Rynn."

My name in his mouth, without the title, without the performance of courtesy. Short, deep and direct, the voice I now know, he uses when he decides to stop being careful.

I get chills up my spine and straight back down between my legs. Nope. Bad guy. He is an unknown mystery that is obviously trying too hard. He wants to play? I can play but he won't be the victor at the end of it. I am not someone to try to fuck around with. If he wants to be with me, fine but that is not what he wants. I don't know what it is he wants but the fact he is hiding it, tells me enough.

"I don't know what you think I owe you," I scold. My voice comes out perfectly even, though privately I am deciding which rib to break first if he takes one more step. Do I want to feel those large arms wrap against my skin? Maybe, but I won’t let my physical needs take over.

"A detailed accounting of my afternoon? An explanation for how I chose to spend the hours you were not present for? Listen, you offered me a seat in a carriage, not a leash." I tilt my head slightly. "Or did I misunderstand the terms of the arrangement?"

Something moves across his face. Not the warmth he had arrived with but something underneath it, sharper, calculating. His eyes harden.

"You are very good at that," he states.

"At what."

"Answering a question with something that sounds like an answer."

"I answered your question. You simply do not like the answer." I smile at him. The same gentle feminine grace I give everyone. The one that tells him precisely nothing. "Now, it is late. We head back to Cadryn in the morning... early." I eye him closely. "Was there anything else?"

There was a hushed tone in the corridor. I walk toward Alaric slowly which forces him to take several steps back into the hall to ensure we keep our distance. I turn my head as if someone is calling my name and through the small window at the end of it I can see a strip of sky, dark and salted with stars, and I feel the pull of it in my soul. There is an awareness at the base of my sternum, something that wants to turn me toward the sky.

"No," he says, jolting me back to the present, "nothing else."

He looks at me with those careful, cataloguing eyes and whatever he was planning to get out of knocking on my door in the middle of the night, he won't get.

"Goodnight, Lady Rynn."

"Goodnight."

I close the door. Smug bastard, thinks a raised eyebrow and a low voice were going to get him anywhere. I stand in the dark on the other side of the door for a moment, my hand still on the latch as I listen to his footsteps descend down the corridor. Even. Unhurried. I had not cracked. Whatever game Alaric was running, whatever he was trying to find in the gap between my words, he had left with nothing I had not already decided to give him.

I turn back to the window. The stars are still here. They are always here. I have never once looked up and found them gone, but I still search for them every night ensuring they don't disappear. I can always count on the stars. I keep my eyes on the sky until something in my chest unknots itself.

I smile up at the infinite sky above and I just exist. I am someone who thinks about everything, constantly, in careful order, and keeps the most dangerous things locked behind the parts of my face that smile. When I seek out the stars now, my mind clears.

After a couple of minutes I think about my interaction with Alaric. Tonight was different. My words just came out. I said the sharp things I wanted to rather than the thought out, practiced words. Let him see more edges than I typically show anyone.

The shaman had taken something that I willingly gave. I reach for whatever I had given away and found, as she had promised, only the physical and none of the emotions. There is a hole in my chest but without feeling.

I pull my gaze from the constellations and head to bed.

It does not occur to me until much later. Weeks later, in a different city, in a different kind of danger. The thing I had given her was not only a feeling.

It was the reason I had ever learned to hide.

OceanofPDF.com

CHAPTER SEVEN

Rynn

I wake up with the worst headache either from not eating dinner last night or the extreme emotional ups and downs of yesterday, I don’t know. Feeling for the bag under my pillow that houses a full body protection for my children, I carefully secure the string of the pouch around my thigh and continue to string upward, wrapping around my waist. I added some cloth in the mini bag to ensure the vial would not break. After packing up my room, I head down in search of food.

No smell comes from the kitchen and I can't find the woman running the inn. I do however find some stale poppyseed muffins at her front check-in table which I help myself to. When I step outside, I find the two men I am traveling with, staring at a scene down the lane. I take a bite out of my muffin and stop mid chew. An angry crowd has gathered just down the road from us. They are hollering and laughing, circling around something on the ground. My feet move without permission, heading straight for the crowd, Alaric follows me.

When I reach the edge of the rowdy crowd, I see there is a young girl, maybe 14 or so at the center of the cruelty. She could be older but it’s hard to tell with the lack of meat on her bones. She has an eye swollen shut, blood runs down her temple and she is curled into a ball on the dirt path. The crowd disperses seconds before I step closer to her. I see the spit mixed with dirt and smashed vegetables over her gray dress that had been washed so many times the color had given up. Her feet are bare and bleeding and as I observe her, she doesn't make a sound. That was the thing that stopped me.

She's not crying. She's not asking for help. She is just lying there. Accepting it.

Taking a bite of my muffin, I turn away because anyone not willing to fight deserves what comes to them.

She comes with us. Nox pushes through my head.

Absolutely not. I continue to move away.

Then I will take her. He sneers at my abrupt response.

You can't even fit over here if you tried. You would squish this whole block. I point out.

I am glad you agree. She will go in the carriage then.

Ho- what makes you think I agreed. No! N.O. Why would I do something so foolish as to get involved with human ward business?

She has power, I told you. She is the witch from yesterday. Her power is hard to sense but I do sense a kernel of it which means she is hiding, which means she is alone. Which means she will not stay with these animals.

So you want me to grab her and what... drop her off in some random spot in the desert. That's much better. I argue.

Alaric is crouched down, not touching her, his eyes moving over her. Assessing. She flinches back from him which puts a knot in my stomach. I don’t understand why I should care... I survived on my own in this place. She will be fine. I just want to get home to my children.

No. You will protect her. Nox has never been so hard on me before. So final. No room to argue.

I look up at the sky, sighing. How is this going to even work? What could I possibly say to Henrix and Alaric? I was a guest in their carriage but there is no point going back and forth with Nox because I can feel how serious he is. I don't know if he would actually come for her if I don't bring her but it would be hilarious to see some of these assholes in the human ward get squished by him.

I stand still for a count of five with my back to the girl and my jaw set. The morning sun is already warm on my face and I think about how I just want to get on the road already. This shit is for someone else to handle. I shake my head processing what lies ahead, the road back, the vial, the look in the king's eye which puts this feeling of unease in my gut. I am already carrying more than I asked for and I don’t know what comes next. On top of that, there is a hollow space now living in my chest allowing my anger to be more visible, my mask harder to put on.

I know I can't leave her if she really is a witch who is obviously not surviving on her own. Damn dragon and his damn conscience, doing all my caring for me whether I ask for it or not. I turn around and walk back to the crumbled form on the dirt path.

I crouch down in front of her. Her only working eye is focused only on the man in front of her.

"I'm not going to touch you," Alaric holds his hands up in surrender.

She goes still and finally looks up at me.

Her eyes are the eyes of someone who has stopped trusting the meaning of words a long time ago. She assesses me, the adara on my face, my royal ward clothing, the dagger at my hip. Running through whatever calculation she runs through every time someone new stands over her, trying to determine what category of bad this was going to be.

I let her look. I don't move and I definitely don't perform. My irritation is clear on my face.

"Can you walk?" My voice flat.

Hers is shaky as she whimpers, "Yes."

"Then get up. You're coming with me."

I stand before she answers and see Alaric just staring at me in shock. I don't pay him any mind. I walk back to the carriage. I hear her get up slowly and follow. I take a breath as I head back to the carriage and soften my eyes, relax my face and pull my shoulders back.

Henrix is leaning against the carriage door with his arms crossed, smiling slightly as he raises an eyebrow. He looks at the girl, then at my delicately placed smile, and before he can get a word out I softly explain, "She will be working for me as a cleaner." I continue to walk past him to the carriage door. He closes his mouth with a laugh under his breath while shaking his head.

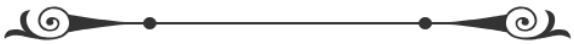
He turns and comes in close to my back placing his hand on top of mine, holding open the door and whispers, "Allow me." His breath runs down my neck and I wanna puke. This is definitely not the same as when Alaric was at my room last night and I felt his warmth sinking into my skin. I don’t trust Alaric but damn me, I could see myself crawling up him like a tree. This peacock? I could take him down in a handful of seconds.

I turn slightly to his lust filled eyes and refrain from elbowing him in the chest. His hand moves to the small of my back and I keep my expression soft, gentle. Before I get a word out, the wind changes, lifting my hair off

my shoulders and pushing Henrix back forcing him to stumble and release me. We turn to see Alaric looking off into the distance jaw tight.

I step away from the door turning to the girl who is obviously uncomfortable with the idea of getting into a small space with strangers. I see her physically shake, eyeballing the two men with me. I roll my eyes and walk up to her, gently placing a hand on her shoulder. I don't let her pull away, "There is nothing and no one that I cannot protect you from. Get in or stay here. The choice is yours." I whisper, leaving out the part about my dragon.

Head bowed. She chooses to get in.



Tension released out of my neck about one hour into the ride, away from the human ward. I was able to think more clearly and got the broken child's name finally. Nidmeh. She said it like she wasn't sure anyone had asked before.

I nodded and went back to the window. That was the extent of it. Henrix was horrible at hiding his discomfort at Nidmeh's beat up body and smell of piss but overcame it quickly and attempted conversation. He had given up trying to fill the silence forty minutes ago and is asleep against the carriage wall. Alaric at the opposite window, watching the road with the same quality of attention he seems to bring to everything. Careful, contained, giving nothing away.

He had not asked about my decision on the girl. I had not explained further.

We understand each other on that, at least.

Nox, I gently push his direction to see if he is still upset with my pushback earlier. *Why? I still don't understand why she is our business.*

I feel that constant flow of warmth in my chest focus and narrow in on me. The impression that comes back is not words exactly but more how you feel when a parent is staring you down to guilt you into making a good decision. I know he isn't going to explain more and I have to resist the urge to force him to talk. I stifle a sigh instead, sit up taller and keep my guard up. He will tell me when he is ready. He will tell me eventually.

Nidmeh has not relaxed. She sits in the corner of the bench with her back against the carriage wall and her knees slightly drawn up, moving her eyes, to me, to Alaric, to Henrix's sleeping form, back to me. Her terror still prominent on her face. She makes herself smaller every time Alaric shifts his weight. I had spent years killing that posture in myself. Beating it out through training and sheer refusal until my spine knew how to hold itself straight even when everything in me wants to fold.

Watching it alive in someone else makes my jaw clench.

She survived. Nox feels my disgust.

So do rats.

Nox pauses at that.

You are being uncharitable.

I did what you asked, doesn't mean I gotta like it and plus I am plenty charitable. I let you eat whatever wildlife you find without giving you shit like the king wants me to.

That's not charity that's accepting reality.

I dismiss his comment and pick up my needlework. I want to yell at the driver to push the horses faster but I bite my tongue.

We stopped once, at the same inn we had used on the way out. Alaric, this time around, paid for two rooms, one for the men, one for us. Nidmeh follows me inside without being told and stands in the center of the room while I set my things down, still doing that thing with her eyes, alert and on guard. What could she actually do if there was a threat? Nothing.

I pull back the blanket on the second side of the bed. "Sleep," I snap. "No one comes through that door without going through me first." I flash her the dagger under my skirts and move to push a chair under the door. I won't do much but it would alert me.

She looks at the bed. Then at me. There is something in her face I recognize. The confusion of someone trying to reconcile two things that don't fit together. I get it. I don't have the patience to hide behind my mask pretending I am the papered Lady Rynn of the Royal Ward, the Touched. The fine gold at my collarbone. Warm words delivered to Henrix in a voice that had no warmth in it at all.

"You're the Touched," she states, voice cracking from lack of use.

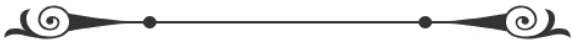
"Surprise. Drink some water and the food."

I turn and walk to the bathroom to remove my adara and remove the long ride from my skin. When I emerge, Nidmeh is fast asleep so peaceful and

relaxed you could think her a normal kid but the dried blood on her along with the deep blue-purple coloring starting to show on her swollen eye, brings reality back that she is no normal kid.

I take the water basin and cloth to clean her as best I can and get into bed. She hardly moved while I cleaned, moaning slightly, squeezing the pillow as if to fight anyone who tries to take it from her.

We are back in the carriage before dawn.



We are several miles away from Cadryn’s common ward edge. Something is wrong.

I notice it. First in my body, a low-grade wrongness that sits between my shoulder blades before my mind has a name for it. Then it hit me.

Silence.

I think that maybe it's the lack of people. Coming into Cadryn, the road had been thick with people. Families with small children. Sun scorched skin. The press and noise of a ward population going about the business of surviving another day. But that's not the silence I feel now. This is felt in my core.

Nox.

He is already ahead of us. I feel him ranging out, his attention moving through the air above the ridge, reading something I can't see from inside the carriage.

Something is wrong. I can feel it on the currents. I don't want to go too far from you but Rynn... stay alert. Nox urges.

The tightness in my chest makes it feel as if Nox is also holding in a breath.

I keep my face at the window, hand finding the hilt of the blade at my hip. Resting there, not gripping, just present.

Beside me, something changes in Alaric too. It’s his stillness, as if he's listening... waiting. He has seen the road too. Feels the oddness in the air.

Our eyes meet across the carriage; some voiceless acknowledgement passes between as we both know he saw me on that ridge and therefore he

knows what I am capable of. We become two partners ready to fight our way out of whatever comes at us with a simple glance.

I smell it now, two miles out.

Smoke. Not cookfires. Not the forge district running its evening burn. This is the smoke of things that are not meant to burn. Stone and timber and something underneath it, acrid and dark. A smell that lives in the back of my memory from a childhood in places where fires were never accidents.

There is something moving within the streets of the common ward but I cannot say what.

The road narrows into the pass here, red rock rising sheer on both sides, close enough to touch if I leaned out the window, the kind of gap that looks split clean down the middle by an ultimate power no one knows the name of anymore. The road bends inside it, following the rock rather than cutting a straight line through it. This is the only way into the common ward from this side of the kingdom.

The sky above Cadryn's ridge is orange. Too low. Too close to the buildings.

The twins.

The thought hits before anything else. Before strategy, before calculation, before any of the careful measured thinking I have trained myself to do, my mind repeats over and over, *"The twins."*

"Stop the carriage!"

We are still slowing when we come around the bend and the impact hits before I understand what it even was. My body is thrown, our horse and cart already flying sideways onto the road, no one driving it anymore.

The left side of the carriage lifts and the whole structure tilts with the terribly slow certainty of something that can't be stopped, and then the world rotates, wood splitting, Henrix's shout cuts off, the ground comes up fast and hard.

Then the bells. Not church bells. Not a call to prayer. The short, hard clang of the watchtower bells on the southern wall, the ones that have no purpose except one.

We have just entered the edge of the common ward.

OceanofPDF.com

CHAPTER EIGHT

Rynn

The broken window above my head shows Cadryn burning.

I am on my side in the wreckage. The ringing of the bell is still going off. The carriage has rolled and it's disorienting, the door above and below me where the wall should have been, the bench I had been sitting on, is now running up as if pointing me where to exit. I take one steading breath and assess. Fingers, wrists, knees. Everything that's supposed to move still does. I get my hands under me, cutting them on the glass of the shattered window beneath me and push up.

The door frame is above my head. I grab it and pull myself through.

Outside the sky is the wrong color. What should have been the last bruised light of evening is gone, choked out by smoke that has stopped rising and started spreading, a low ceiling of it pressing down over the ward, lit an ugly amber from the fires below. Not dark yet. Worse than dark. The kind of visibility that lets you see exactly enough to wish you couldn't.

I drop to the ground and straighten up to take in the ward.

Alaric is already up. He has a gash above his eyebrow leaking blood into his eye. He wipes it away with the back of his hand and scans the road with focused calm of someone whose training has taken over. His blades are already in his hand and he holds them with ease. For a split second, I think to laugh. There it is, weeks of watching him perform clumsy charm at every Solenne, and here he stands, blood in his eye, blade already an extension of his own arm. No merchant moves like that. But the next second, I notice

Nidmeh on the ground ten feet out. She has her arms over her head and she is not moving but her shoulders are rising and falling.

Henrix is pulling himself upright against the overturned carriage, his face the color of old ash.

The driver is gone. Whether thrown or fled I don't stop to find out and the horses are gone. I cannot see who or what it was that hit our carriage, only that it is now being engulfed in flames. There are scattered clothes and food all over the road with few people going every direction in frantic movements. I don’t spot any danger straight away but then I hear them.

Soldiers are moving through the ward two streets over. The systematic movement of men marching, sent to either take over the area or slaughter it.

MY CHILDREN! I scream to Nox.

I pull my dagger from beneath my skirt and run, not feeling the glass still pushing into my hands. Nox is overhead moving fast toward my home in the royal ward.



The screaming starts before I reach the first intersection.

Not the screaming of people running. The other kind. The kind that stops short.

I have only heard it twice before in my life and both times I was small enough that someone else was supposed to handle it. There is no one else now. I register the smoke thickening above the rooftops and the ash beginning to fall like dirty snow and keep moving.

The streets between the outer ward and the royal ward are chaotic in varying degrees. The further in I go, the worse it gets. People moving in both directions, some with purpose, some with none, the scatter of a population that has not been told what to do and is inventing answers in real time. I see several people with makeshift weapons from their kitchens. Real blades are not for the general public to hold and they make do. I move against the current and keep my head down and do not stop for anything moving faster than I ever have before. A woman grabs my arm near the fountain square and I break her grip mid-stride, knocking her down without

looking at her face. I do not have the space to care. My only focus is to get to my home.

The smell hits me half a street before I see the first body.

The mix of metallic copper and burning char sits at the back of my throat and will not leave. I have smelled it before in smaller quantities, in wounds and even once from a building that caught fire in the night when I was seven years old. This is not a small quantity. This is the smell of a ward that has been opened like a wound and left to bleed.

A man is on his knees at the mouth of the alley to my left next to a child and woman lying face down. Both hands pressed flat to the ground. An animalistic roar screams out of him as he shakes. I do not stop.

I am ready to cut down any fucker I see with a blade, eyes scanning every inch as I push faster. Further in, a child is crying from a window three floors up, the sound thin and repetitive and unanswered. The building is on fire but I keep running.

Nox hits the bond like a fist.

Not words. A direction. The specific pressure of his attention pointing through the ward like a finger pressed to my sternum, urgent in a way I’ve never felt him before. I correct course without thinking.

Above me his shadow crosses the rooftops. He roars once and the sound of it hits my chest before the ears. My bones vibrate. Somewhere, streets over, I hear soldiers scattering, boots on stone, as if the men slaughtering Cadryn's people have just decided that whatever they are being paid is not enough to also take on a dragon.

I run with all my might.

A soldier appears at the end of the lane. Not Cadryn colors. Darker. Heavier armor, the southern make, the weight of Drenoch’s Woken military I have only ever heard of in my father's descriptions and in the nightmares those descriptions left behind. He has a sword already drawn and his eyes find me the moment I come around the corner.

I do not slow down.

I close the distance before he has fully decided if I am a threat. He swings wide, the swing of someone who expects room for it. But I am faster. I drop under it, drive my knee into his inner thigh as I slide past him, coming up behind him as he drops to one knee, his blade with him, I use the blade Gael gave me and stab it into his ear all the way to the hilt. He goes down. I pull up on my feet and keep running.

Behind me I feel Alaric before I hear him. The crack of charged air, the sharp electric smell of a storm discharge finding its mark. He takes two soldiers who pop out of the side street as I run by. I don't look back. I don't need to.

The next corner opens into what had been a market square that morning. It is not a market square anymore.

There are bodies. Eight that I can see scattered around in various positions. It is not a lot but enough that I have to choose my steps. Four Drenoch soldiers at the far end, working methodically through the stalls, pulling people out from wherever they have hidden. One man has his hand fisted with a woman's hair, dragging her out on the road. I do not watch what happens after because I have already calculated that four is manageable and I am already moving.

They do not hear me coming. The smoke and the screaming cover whatever sound I make.

Thirty seconds. Maybe less.

The first two are straightforward. One with a slice from his lower abdomen wrapping around his side. Intestines now falling out. The other one I throw my elbow into his side, swinging around while he is hunched, elbowing his spine. When he drops to his knees, I roar as I swing my blade into the side of his throat and rip it out, now pouring out blood all over my skirts.

The third catches me with an elbow before I see it coming and my vision goes white and narrow for a half-second and I drop under his next swing by accident but I am adaptable, slice the back of his knee, find his throat with my blade when he buckles on my way up. He goes down loud. I don't wait to see him fall to the ground as I run full speed toward the fourth who was backing away from his fellow monsters who I have now slain. Probably didn’t expect much of a fight when instructed to dismember and slaughter an unsuspecting kingdom.

I feel Alaric's windstorm push against my body helping to increase my speed and just as I get to this asswipe, I jump and the wind pushing me higher, I grab onto this male's face and swing around him snapping his neck. I land in a crouch as we hit the dirt and look up at Alaric who’s covered head to toe in blood and eyes hard. Nidmeh is coming up but far behind.

Blood on my hands. Blood on my skirt. A cut on my cheek leaking warmth and slowing down the side of my face. I wipe it with the back of my wrist as I turn to run. I hear the soft cries of the people who were dragged out by the soldiers huddled on the ground together but I don't have the time to tell them to run.

The royal ward gates are ahead.

Soldiers. Everywhere. I count at least 20 before contemplating if I can jump the 30 foot wall. I don’t have time for Alaric to catch up and to discuss using his power to lift me. I am frantic, heart racing, eyes wide, I can’t focus, my teeth painful from clenching. They are fine. They are fine. They are fine.

I feel for Nox and surge through our bond with all my force. I can see what he sees. He is high and moving fast, a city opening in pieces, fire starting in the lower ward and working its way inward, Drenoch banners going up on the southern road.

The twins, I bellow through the bond. *WHERE ARE THEY.*

He pushes me out of his vision and then sends images down the bond.

The image comes through sharp and immediate, better than words, worse than not being there. The royal ward interior. A courtyard. Bessa's house.

My skin itches from not being able to run to them.

Get me over this wall, NOW.

He is already descending.



Nox lands outside the ward gate. His large wings move wind so aggressively that everything flies away. Nox tells me to wait before climbing on. Heat so immediate and consuming, I already have my shield of protection surrounding me to disperse any heat that comes my way. Another perk of having a dragon. I am just behind him, shifting on my feet, as Alaric reaches us, but keeps his distance. Nidmeh is still running toward us, farther back. I have never witnessed Nox's fire at this level. I've only ever seen small, controlled bursts. This is neither. When he releases his fury onto the soldiers and the gate, there is nothing left standing.

The soldiers are ash when Nox closes his jaw. I climb up his leg not paying mind to the cuts his scales give me, slicing my dress to shreds. I would rip this damn thing off if I took a second but I can't.

I feel it before I see it. The barrier.

Not smoke this time but something warm and electric and wild. It is magic that has never been trained, so different from what I know.

As Nox lowers, I can see it.

It is circular. Perhaps ten feet across. The air inside it shimmers the way air shimmers above desert rock at midday. Visible heat, visible force, a boundary that declares itself without requiring anyone to see it. Inside the circle I can see them. Tavon on his knees with his arms around Lyra. Lyra with her face in his shoulder. Both of them shaking. My heart breaks open.

And Bessa.

She is on the ground at the edge of the circle with her back against the low wall, and she is not moving, and the stillness of her is one that is burned in my memory so vividly, it could mean nothing else. The absence. A different quality than sleep, than unconsciousness. Empty.

Afilo is on his knees beside her with both hands pressed to his own face and he is not making a sound.

I see Alaric running three streets over with Nidmeh. They must have followed Nox's direction. I tuck and roll down Nox's leg, landing hard on my feet in a crouch. I can't wait for Nox to set down.

I run to my children.

There are several dead soldiers all over this block along with neighbors. The barrier hits me three feet from them. A wall of heat that presses against my skin and I push hard. I feel the heat trying to sear its way through my chest but then stops just under the surface of my skin. I feel this power connecting to mine somehow like a pull of recognition. My skin is bubbling and burning as I scream out, straining to break through. I know in my soul it is not trying to stop me. It simply is what it is, the same way a knife simply has sharp edges.

I do not slow down. Pushing hard, I am through after four steps but it feels like forty. The heat drops away and Tavon's running to me and his face crumples.

"Mama!"

I am on my knees in front of them, arms already reaching. My skin is still hot from the barrier, the burns already fading, healing faster than it should.

They surge at me regardless. It doesn't burn them. I don't burn them.

The full weight of them hitting me before I can brace. Tavon's hands find my arm and grip, nails digging in the back of my arm clawing for purchase. Lyra has my shoulder, her small fingers desperate and shaking. I hold them both and I do not say anything as they sob and break down and I take what they can’t carry. As the kids adjust themselves to get as close to me as possible, the sleeves of my thin dress rip off. Tavon had pulled one side when he was climbing into my lap and now is ripped open. The sleeve Lyra pulled is now off also. Ripped at the seam while she climbed on my hip.

My sweet six year olds I haven't held like this since they were babies and my breath falters knowing that the reason they need this moment is because of something unfathomable.

I have both my babies wrapped up on me. My knees are sinking in the mud as I hold Lyra on my hip, my hand wraps around her backside holding her up, my other arm wraps around Tavon's shoulders as he curls up in a ball on my lap.

We don't speak for a while, just holding each other as the chaos grows around us. Nox is standing guard of the protective bubble we are in and I can see Alaric and Nidmeh standing closer to us. Alaric, cradling his arm with a severe burn that probably happened when he tried to cross the barrier.

I calm my children, with strong but gentle hands letting them know I am here, they are safe and to breathe. Then they start to talk.

Not in any order. Not in any sequence that makes sense. Both of them at once, voices tangle over each other. Tavon's words break apart mid-sentence, swallowed by the next sob before he can finish them. Lyra's are out in short bursts, three or four words, then nothing, then a few more, her breath catching every time she tries to push past it. I hold them and listen as I piece it together from what they can get out.

The soldiers had come into the lane. They had heard them outside. Bessa had moved the children away from the windows, kept her voice calm, had done everything right. The soldiers had come through the neighbors first, sharing the same wall. The Traust family. Geika and her three younger brothers. Then the screams. Lyra stops here and Tavon holds onto her tighter, shaking violently.

Their friend Geika, the sweetest freckle-faced, red-headed girl, was only 7 years old. Their closest friend they grew up with in the common ward.

Tavon croaks out, “The quiet Mama... it got so quiet.”

Bessa had pushed the twins into the main room trying to hide them under the stair but didn’t have time before their door was kicked in. Had put herself between them and the door. A soldier had come through it.

Tavon tells me this part in three words and then cannot continue.

Lyra finishes it. Precise. Careful. Her voice doing the thing it does when she is holding something very large, very still so it will not spill. One sentence. Then she stops.

I look at Bessa.

She had done exactly what she was supposed to do. She had kept her body between my children and the thing coming through the door and she had not moved.

I feel my stomach trying to move up into my chest and I suppress my tears.

I pull the twins in tighter and press my mouth to the top of Tavon's head then Lyra's. I hold them until Tavon's breathing begins to slow. Until Lyra's grip on my shoulder loosens from desperation to a gentle touch.

Then I look up at Afilo.

He has lowered his hands from his face. He is looking at me with the eyes of a man who has just watched the person he had spent his life beside go still, and does not know yet what the world looks like from this side of it.

Behind him, near the line in the sand creating this circular barrier, a pile of ash. Nothing else around has burned. That must be the soldier.

"She knew." My voice cracking. "She knew and she stayed."

"She always stayed." His voice comes out rough, like it has to climb over something to get out. "Forty years and she never once left when it mattered. Why would she start with my grandbabies in front of her."

He looks down at his hands, then back at the children, still wrapped around me. "She refused to let the soldier grab the children. He threw her outside and the kids ran out, stood behind her. I was running to her. I saw…" His jaw works. "She was a force to be reckoned with."

I don't say anything to that. There isn't anything that fits.

"Saw the sword come through her," he says, quieter now. "Saw it from the back, before I even reached them. Kids saw it too." He looks at Tavon and Lyra like the words cost him something to say in front of them, but he says them anyway. "I grabbed her as she fell and then this…" He nods at the

ash, the circle, the children. "Whatever this was. It took him before he could blink."

“We just held hands, Mama.” Lyra, full of confusion and defense.

I look at the ash again. Then my children, who have learned what their hands could do because they watched their grandma be murdered in front of them.

"She'd be proud of you." I rub my hands along her arm. "I am proud of you both." I nod to Afilo who has now lost his son and wife and it feels like a piece of all of us has died too.

He looks at me for a long moment. Then he nods his understanding.

I stand up, setting the children down and they instantly clutch to my sides. I walk to Afilo who is still on his knees and rest a hand on his shoulder. I gently grab my children's hands to move them back and bend down to kiss Bessa's forehead. "You could have run. You stayed anyway. I won't forget what that cost you or the gift you have given me." I feel the pain radiating off my children. "Rest now. I've got them." I whisper into her hair.



Alaric is at the edge of the barrier, his burned arm cradled against his chest, his jaw clenched tight enough that the muscle stands out along the side of it. Nidmeh stands slightly behind him. Neither of them has been able to cross.

I look at Nox through the shimmering barrier.

He stands in the lane behind them, his mass filling the space between the buildings with the displacement of something that does not need permission to exist anywhere.

The children made this, his awe radiating through the bond. *It is theirs. It will drop when they choose.*

I look down at Tavon. He is still holding my hand but his shaking has slowed. Lyra is watching the barrier, her eyes moving slowly from one edge of it to the other and back again.

"Lyra," I say quietly.

She looks up at me.

"You can let it down now."

She considers this. Then she unfolds her hand from mine and instructs Tavon to place his hands atop hers. Her palms face up and Tavon’s now on top, and they both breathe deep. Light emanating slightly from between them, the shimmer dissolves, not all at once but in pieces.

Alaric steps through where the line had been. The air around him still carries the charge of what his magic has been doing for the last several minutes, a sharp, electric smell like a storm that hasn't fully passed, clinging to his skin and clothes now that the barrier isn't holding it back.

Up close his size registers as a shock being so close to my children. The broad width of his shoulders, shirt covered in blood.

The dark beard along his jaw does nothing to soften how much space he takes up. Ink covers nearly all of him, down both arms, across his chest where his shirt has torn open at the collar, over his back when he turns, threading between his fingers and across his knuckles. Old work, dense and deliberate, layered like it had taken years rather than a single sitting. Scars move through it here and there, pale ridges of old burns gone silver-pink with healing, the kind a body collects rather than chooses.

The angry red mark branching up from his wrist made by blood magic is stark and angry. Bulging out of the skin.

Tavon's breath catches when Alaric crouches near them. He is not built for small spaces or small people.

But Alaric's eyes aren't on the children. They are already moving, scanning the rooftops, the lane behind him, the gaps between buildings, cataloguing every place a second attack could come from before he turns his gaze to Bessa. His jaw is tight. The hand that isn't burned has curled into a loose fist at his side, like it is looking for a blade that isn't there anymore.

He looks at Afilo and pain passes behind his eyes when he takes in the body and the old man kneeling beside it. He looks at me and his eyes are piercing. The blue and gold in his eyes are hard to look at. As if the storm in them were a physical manifestation of what's going on inside.

"We need to move," his voice stern.

"I know."

Nox's attention shifts from the rooftops to the two of them, the rest of him still and watchful the way he's been since he landed. Tavon grabs my hand. Lyra does not move, fear coursing her little body but her head is high eyes narrow in determination as she waits patiently for my direction.

Tension is building as Nox and Alaric lock eyes.

The carriage next to you, Nox suggests. *I can carry it. The children ride inside with you and Nidmeh.* A pause. *He does not ride, he stays.*

I turn to Alaric. "He says you don't come."

"What?" The word comes out sharp, the first crack I've seen in him since the lane. "Soldiers are still moving through this ward. You want me to stay behind with nothing? Tell him I'm coming." He turns to Nox, standing his ground and growls, "I'm coming."

Nox lowers his head in front of Alaric who takes several steps back and Nox huffs hot smoke in his face blowing his dark waves back.

"I would advise you to watch how you speak to him, and me for that matter." I suggest but turn my head from him to guide my children to the nearby carriage. This is between them, but we need to go. My children are top priority.

I have known you four days, Nox declares. *I have known her since the night she was born. I do not owe you a place beside my children.*

"He says he's known you for four days and he's not interested in knowing you further."

Alaric's jaw works. He looks at Nox, eyes hard and I see the debate in his mind. Is he really going to try and fight Nox? As I open the carriage door, Alaric pushes, "Then what do you want from me? Name it."

A pause, longer than the last one and we don't have time. I hear the soldiers gathering down the way. I feel Nox considering, he is deciding whether something is worth the trouble of allowing.

Everything he is carrying, Nox directs. *Every blade. If he wants to sit near my children, he sits with empty hands, where I can see them the entire time.*

"He wants your weapons," I pass the message. "All of them. If you want a seat in that carriage."

The look Alaric gives me is flat and immovable which communicates clearly that he has heard me correctly and doesn't care for the terms.

"We are in the middle of an active attack." Each word is sharp. The voice of a man keeping a leash on his anger. "There are Drenoch soldiers between us and any exit from this city. You want me to disarm?"

"Nox wants you to disarm. Or you stay here." My arms swing dramatically with the words.

"Your dragon."

"My dragon," I bite out.

"Who is the size of a building."

"He is aware of his size. We don’t have time for this." I turn to direct Nidmeh to step inside.

Alaric looks at Nox again. Nox holds his gaze, his head low. He growls low pulling his lips back exposing his massive teeth.

This is more time than I intend to spend on this, Nox decides. *He gives me the blades or I will need to eat him. I cannot risk him jumping on the carriage while I am holding onto its top. Decide now.*

"He says you're testing his patience." My patience is ending and my words direct. "Weapons, or you stay. Choose quickly."

A silence.

Alaric looks at the twins. Tavon is watching him with wide eyes. Lyra is watching him with the same careful assessment she turns on everything; her head tilts slightly, her expression giving nothing away.

He reaches under his jacket. Sets a blade on the low wall. Then another. Nidmeh is already in the carriage with my children. There is now a small armory on the ground and wall's edge.

"Satisfied?"

Were these weapons on him when we were traveling? I look at Nox.

There is one more. Nox snaps his teeth inches from Alaric.

"One more," I say, raising my eyebrow and crossing my arms. "I don't have time for this, Alaric. NOW, please." It is hard to get that last word out. I don't have time for fake pleasantries right now.

The look he gives me is not fury. Something adjacent to it with sharper edges. But he reaches into his boot and produces a short blade and sets it with the others.

I gesture dramatically toward the carriage, welcoming him in. He narrows his eyes as he passes me.

I look back at Afilo. He is on his feet now, one hand on the wall to steady himself, his face drained of color, of life. Using any pieces left in him to stand up.

"Come with us," I offer.

He shakes his head. One small movement. "I'll not leave her here."

I look at him for a moment and nod in understanding. I’ve known Afilo for eight years and know there is no arguing with the man.

The last thing I do before I get in is look back at Bessa.

I get in and feel the carriage move slightly with the power of his wings moving the air. He is above us as his claws on one leg gently grab the roof of the carriage, his nails now decor on the ceiling of the cart. The carriage lifts.

And Cadryn falls away below us.

OceanofPDF.com



CHAPTER NINE

Alaric

The carriage lifts with a lurch that my body registers as wrong before my mind catches up to explain why.

Then my stomach drops. Not falls, drops. The sensation of the ground releasing you without your permission, everything in my gut rising to meet my throat. Beside me Nidmeh makes a sound she immediately swallows and presses both hands flat against the bench like that would anchor her to something. Across from us Tavon grabs the window frame with both hands, his knuckles white, then presses his face to the glass anyway because he can't help it.

Then we are moving upward and the sounds of the city fall away beneath us like something cut loose.

Through the small window the common ward rooftops shrink and keep shrinking. The smoke columns that had been at eye level are suddenly below us, still rising, reaching for us and not quite making it. Cadryn is becoming a thing you can see all of at once rather than a thing you are standing inside. It looks like it is on fire everywhere except the castle, which sits dark and untouched at its center like it has never been part of the same city at all.

Then we clear the smoke entirely and the sky opens up.

Stars. More of them than make sense from the ground, unfiltered by the haze of the ward, so close the stars' brightness is astonishing. The kind of sky that reminds you the world is larger than whatever problem you are currently standing in. Below us Cadryn burns. Above us everything is clear and cold and indifferent and endless.

Lyra sits with her spine straight and her hands folded, not fidgeting once, watching the sky with those careful eyes of hers. Not afraid. Processing. Brave girl. I freeze up. I cannot have this thought. I cannot get attached. I have a job to do and sentiment is a liability.

Nidmeh is pressed so far to the other side of our shared bench she may as well be trying to become part of the carriage wall. Her eyes are closed. Her lips are moving slightly. Counting, maybe. Or praying.

We sit across from Rynn and her children in a carriage with no weapons and a dragon above us, and the torn fabric of Rynn's dress is still exposing her skin to reveal a secret I am certain she does not want to share.

I saw it when the children grabbed her. Both of them at once, desperate and wordless, Tavon's grip pulling the seam at her wrist, Lyra at her shoulder. I clocked the difference in the same moment the fabric moved, the older scars. I know the difference between what other people do to a body and what a person does to their own, and these are the latter. Wounds someone else gives you land wrong, angles fighting each other, places a person would never choose if the choice were theirs. These aren't that. These are patient, more evenly spaced. Kept to the places her own hand could reach.

I have seen it before. A boy in my first command, still soft enough to flinch when the older ones weren't looking. I saw the same marks on his arms once, in passing, and told myself it wasn't mine to ask about. Told myself a dozen things that night that let me walk away instead of sitting down next to him. He was gone within the year, and I have carried what I didn't do ever since.

I say nothing to her now either. I tell myself it's because I have a job to do and she isn't mine to fix, that whatever she carries under that armor is hers to keep, not mine to pull apart for the sake of some conversation that gets King Maerek nothing. That's the version I let myself believe. The truth is closer to the boy than I want it to be. I am watching it happen again, and I am choosing to look away because looking away is easier than knowing what I'd have to become to do anything else.

I turn to look out the window and keep my face as still as I can, assessing the situation. That is all I intend to do with that information until she decides otherwise, which she might never do, which is entirely her right and not my problem. Trying to get a handle on my next steps. Is Lord Vael still alive? He is a great asset to the king but no fighter.

I sit across from all of them and watch Lady Rynn look at her daughter.

Lyra has not said anything since the lane. She watched me surrender all my blades with the focused attention of a child taking notes and she climbed into the carriage without being asked. Shock, I realize. She is trying to process and barely moving a muscle. I've seen this before on the families King Maerek would bring in. Frozen in place, unable to register the loss right in front of them. Then something shifts behind her eyes. Her mouth starts moving wordlessly first, then her body, like she is slowly thawing. I watch all of it happen in seconds. Fear, confusion, anger, guilt, all moving across her face one after the other before she can stop any of it.

Rynn sees it at the same moment I do.

She slides off the bench and onto the floor of the carriage, on her knees, in front of Lyra. The movement is so immediate and so certain that it takes me a moment to understand what I am seeing. This woman who opened a soldier across the abdomen in the lane outside the fountain square, then continued without breaking stride, now on her knees on the floor of a flying carriage because her daughter needs her there.

"Lyra, look at me." Rynn’s stern voice startles me.

Lyra moves her eyes so slowly, as if she is looking through Rynn's head. Her eyes are wide with fear and tears fall down her cheeks. I realize now that this is the first reaction Lyra has had since Rynn asked her to put down that magical death trap the twins created.

"What is it?"

A pause. Lyra's hands tighten in mother’s as her eyes focus. "Mama?"

"I'm here, baby. We are here. You are safe." Rynn’s voice cracks as Tavon moves to sit beside his sister on the bench.

Lyra's breath hitches. Then something breaks open behind her eyes.

"I didn't know," she says. The words come out fast, tumbling over each other. "I didn't know I could do that. If I had known— if I had just— I could have stopped him! Before he—" She stops. Starts again. "Why didn't I know? Why didn't I—"

"Lyra—"

"—and Geika." Her voice climbs. "—her brother! They were right there. They were right there and we just— we left them! We left all of them. There were children mama, they didn't care that we were children, how could they not care? How could they just—" She is shaking now, the words spilling faster than she can organize them, her hands trying to twist out of

her mothers. "You fight. I've seen you. Every morning. Every night. We have room here! We could have brought more people. We could go back! We can save—"

"Lyra."

She doesn't hear it. Or can't stop. The words keep coming, her voice breaking through them, six years old and carrying something no six year old should hold.

I watch Rynn's hands move up toward Lyra's face and then hesitate and drop. Her shoulders are shaking. Not the controlled stillness I have seen from her in the lane or at the barrier. The opposite of that. Something has cracked open in her that she didn't see coming and can't locate fast enough to close. I understand it then. She fought through a burning city for this child. These children. Pushed through a barrier that burned her own skin. Held herself together through all of it. And now her daughter is right in front of her, six years old and unreachable, and Rynn does not know which direction to reach.

I want to step in. The urge surprises me. I have watched King Maerek's men do things I trained myself not to react to, have built entire walls around the part of me that flinches. But this child, drowning in something she has no language for yet, her voice climbing higher with nowhere to land… something in me needs it to stop. I have seen grown soldiers break like this and the only way out is through something solid. Something that interrupts the spiral before it swallows you whole.

But this is not my child. And Rynn is already moving.

Both hands come up to cup Lyra's face, still trembling slightly as they hold her, tilting her up until Lyra's eyes have nowhere else to go but her mother's.

The words stop.

"No," Rynn says. Hard. Absolute. "There is nothing in this realm. Nothing above it or below it. No person, no king, no cause, no city. There is nothing that exists that is above you and your brother. Do you understand me? Nothing. You are the first thing. You will always be the first thing. There is no version of any world where I turn back."

Lyra's chin trembles before she presses her lips together to stop it.

"The barrier," Rynn says, quieter now, her thumbs moving once against Lyra's cheeks. "You didn't know because no one knew. Not me. Not Nox.

Not anyone. You didn't fail anyone. You held each other and you survived and that is the whole of what I needed you to do."

A silence.

"Now, look out the window." Rynn moves now to sit between the twins on the bench.

We all seem to turn to the window. Captivated by the situation. Through the small carriage window the sky is enormous and dark blue at its edges, the stars seem to swallow us, and the land below is distant and quiet and nothing is burning from up here and no one is screaming from up here and the wind moves past the window with the clean sound of air that has never been inside a city.

"Do you hear anything?"

Lyra is quiet for a moment. "No."

"That is safe. That is what safe sounds like. Nox has you. I have you." A pause. "Nothing reaches you here."

Lyra looks at the sky for a long time.

Then she unfolds her hands and leans sideways and puts her head against her mother's shoulder, and Rynn closes her eyes and takes a deep breath, wrapping her arms around them, and we are all silent.

***

I look away from them. Out the window. The land moves slowly beneath us, dark and vast and stripped of detail by the night. What I can make out are shapes. The long roll of hills to the east, the black mass of the mountain range beyond them, ridgelines stacked against a sky full of stars. I have ridden through most of this land on King Maerek's orders. I thought I knew the size of it.

I was wrong. From up here it has no edges I can find.

I was sold to the King of Korreth when I was a baby. Not a child old enough to remember the room or the transaction or the face of the man who handed me over. A baby. My father had a debt he could not pay and I was the thing of value he had on hand. That was the whole of it.

I know this because King Maerek told me himself when I was old enough to ask. He said it flat and without apology, as if the facts of a thing absolve anyone of responsibility for them. Your father owed a sum. You settled it. You should be grateful you were worth enough to cover it.

I have never gone looking for my father. I have no interest in finding a man cruel enough to sell his own child and call it a transaction.

My mother I do not think about. I have no name for her, no face, nothing to locate her with in my memory. Babies do not remember. I have accepted this the way I have accepted everything King Maerek has handed me over the years, as a fact with no remedy and therefore not worth the energy of feeling. Hell, for all I know she was in on the exchange.

What I have never been able to accept, and have never spoken aloud to anyone, is the binding.

Not the mark King Maerek put on me when I was old enough to be useful and dangerous enough to need controlling. That one I understand. That one is simple cruelty dressed up as ownership.

The other one. The one underneath it.

I have felt it my entire life without knowing what it was. A weight that lives beneath my sternum, old and settled, the way a stone feels at the bottom of a river. Not placed there recently, placed there long ago and grown into the landscape of everything around it. I assumed for years, this is what it feels like to be what I am. Half Woken, half something King Maerek refuses to tell me, but I have storm magic running through me that no court record has ever been able to classify or explain.

It has edges. Bindings have edges if you know how to feel for them, and I have spent enough years under King Maerek's mark to know the difference between what a body feels like and what has been done to a body. This one is old. Older than Maerek. Older than anything Maerek's witch could have constructed.

Someone put it there before I was old enough to know I was being touched.

I have never found out why. I have stopped trying to find out because the trying produces nothing and the absence of an answer is worse than not asking at all.

No one has ever put themselves between me and pain before.

I accepted this a long time ago. No one will watch your back except you. Everyone is only out for themselves. I accepted this early on as a fact of life and moved forward because moving forward was the only direction available. But watching Rynn on her knees on the floor of a flying carriage, shaking, cupping her daughter's face in both hands… something about it sits differently. It sits like a wound that has never been named and therefore never closed.

I am aware this is not a thought I should be having. That I am in a flying carriage with a woman I was sent to bring to a king who possibly intends her harm, and two children who would be left without a mother if I do my job correctly, and a dragon who would not hesitate to end me if I give him a reason.

I am aware of all of that but in the quiet of the carriage my thoughts continue to drift.

I have seen care for another, with conditions. King Maerek is generous with that kind. Perform well and you eat. Obey and you keep your teeth. The transaction is always clear. I understood from a very young age that what passes between a king and his property is not love, but I did not understand until much later that all care comes with a ledger, that warmth… is always something to be earned. Is this not universal? Is it possible that some people give it without keeping count?

Davon was the first person to show me true kindness. Not in a tender way. Davon does nothing tenderly. He showed me with his fists when we were boys, stepping in front of me in a corridor because he decided, for reasons he never fully explained, that I was his to look out for. We have nearly died together more times than I can count since then and he has never once presented me with a bill for it.

That is the closest I have come. One person. One loyalty built out of survival and stubbornness and years of standing in the same fire.

What I am watching across this carriage is something else entirely. Something that has no ledger attached to it, no terms, no expiration. Rynn ran through a burning city and pushed through a barrier that burned her own skin and she did not once calculate whether it was worth it because the calculation does not exist for her. These children are not a debt she is settling. They are the first thing and only thing.

I was a baby when my father settled his debt with my body and no one got on their knees on any floor for me.

The binding on my forearm is quiet. Both of them are. For once I do not think about what either one implies.

The twins go out within the first hour. Tavon first, his head dropping sideways against his mother's shoulder mid-sentence, whatever he'd been trying to tell her about Matilda the chicken dissolving into slow breathing. Lyra lasts another twenty minutes, fighting it, her eyes going heavy and

then sharp and then heavy again until she finally gives in and leans into Rynn's other side and is out.

Nidmeh has her eyes closed against the window. Whether she is sleeping or done with the world I can't tell and don't ask.

The carriage is quiet.

"They're remarkable," I say, low, so as not to wake them. My eyes are on Tavon's sleeping face.

Rynn doesn't speak. She keeps her eyes on me, waiting to see where I am going with it.

"The boy especially. The way he held his sister in that lane before you got through." A pause. "He's a protector."

"He's six." Sharp. She turns to face the window, looking at the flat desert land below instead of me.

"I know how old he is." I relaxed my posture. I can feel she is ready for a fight and I won’t give her one. "That wasn't my point."

I let it sit. She has every reason not to want a stranger admiring her sleeping child, and I understand that better than she probably credits me for. I am not performing anything watching him. I have never had reason before to look at a six-year-old and think of anything other than asset or liability, and I don't entirely know what to do with the thought now that I have it.

"You counted them," I continue. "The pool at the Aldenmere Solenne. There were six children there and you had them counted before anyone else knew something was wrong."

She keeps her face still. "I count exits."

"I know. I do the same." I look at her. "I'm asking about the children specifically."

The carriage moves through the dark. Lyra shifts against her shoulder and resettles, and Rynn waits until her breathing evens again before she answers.

"Don't." There is none of that warm deflection she would have given me a week ago. Just a line, placed clearly.

Her hand finds the torn seam at her wrist without seeming to notice she's done it, thumb resting for a second over the old lines there before she catches herself and stops.

"You saw them," she says. Not a question. "The scars?"

I don't pretend. "Yes. I saw them."

"They're not what you think and they are old." She says it cold and emotionless. "Older than the twins. Older than Gael, even. I don't need you filing that away as something delicate about me."

"I have many opinions about you and being delicate is not one of them."

"Good. Because I am a great many things you might not care for. Cold. Calculating. Occasionally aloof enough that entire courts think I haven't noticed them gossiping two feet from my own back. I can live with being thought stupid. I've made a career of it, some days, when it's useful." Her jaw sets. "What I will not be thought of as is weak."

"I didn't think you were."

Shaking her head, she continues to explain, “Sometimes when you are in a place of no control, you find any bit of self to hold onto. This helped me regain my control.”

I only nodded in understanding while she looked at me a moment longer but her stare was not really on me. She had left to the past momentarily and I let her have that space. Then, she turns back to the window, and the subject drops.

I let it go. Some things are not mine to keep asking after, and I've learned enough in the last hour to know exactly where that line sits with her.

I recalibrate. Whatever version of her I've been building in my head over the last several weeks has shifted tonight.

"The attack came from the south," I whisper.

"I know."

"Drenoch doesn't move without reason. Someone gave them one. And whoever it was… answers generally don't live in the same direction as the problem."

She looks at me. I am watching the dark land below the window now, not her. My jaw is set. A man choosing his words carefully.

"Why would a King make a decision to attack innocent people for any other reason than power? It's an odd thought to think anyone else would have answers more than himself," she says.

"In my experience," I tread carefully, "you're right that a king as power-hungry and controlling as Drenoch's would listen to no one but himself. But ask yourself: in all the years he's had the opening, why now? Why pull the trigger now? Cadryn is strong. Strong trading routes, money, armies. My gut says going straight to Drenoch won't get you answers, or the help you'd need after. Not that you've asked me for either."

She looks back out her window and doesn't ask what experience. My intuition tells me she is a fighter. She is strong and will protect those she loves, and if I am right, she will not just leave it alone. She will need someone responsible for what her children just went through. She doesn't seem the type to just let the dust settle and pretend nothing happened. I file the silence away and turn my face back to the dark too.

"Go to sleep," she yawns.

A pause. I haven't been told what to do by anyone in years except King Maerek. "I don't take direction well."

"Neither do I," she says. "And yet here we are."

Our eyes lock. Something in hers has gone darker at the edges, the amber pulling toward something closer to ember. Something shifts in the dark across her face. A hint of a smile maybe. She may be exhausted now but I see that fire in her more and more. Her mask is cracking around me.

Good.

OceanofPDF.com



CHAPTER TEN

Rynn

The land moves beneath us and I cannot stop seeing it.

Not the mountains. Not the dark scrub below or the stars above. The lane. The market square. The child was crying from a window three floors up, in a building already burning, while I kept running because I had to. I told myself it was the only choice, and I still believe that but it sits like a knife through my chest.

Nox, I push through the bond.

I am here.

I kept running past them… I counted them off and told myself I couldn't stop. That the twins were the only thing that mattered.

You could not have carried them all, he says. And the twins needed you.

I know that.

But... Nox urges me to get it out.

But I knew their names... Some of them. The ones Lyra and Tavon had grown up beside, played with every time we went to visit their grandparents. I knew those children by voice. And they are gone and nobody is going to answer for it. Bessa lived in the common ward and I know our ruler, I know he doesn't give a shit about anyone Woken or not below the royal ward. He is a coward. There will be no army riding south. No court convening. Marked and filed away as the cost of whatever Drenoch wanted badly enough to slaughter a ward full of people to take it. Our King will probably throw a fucking celebration and seal our borders but justice... That won't happen.

A pause. *Yes,* he says quietly. *That is likely true.*

I look at my hands in my lap. At the gold on my wrists catching the faint light. The blade still sheathed at my thigh that I had put through several soldiers tonight without breaking stride.

I have spent ten years making myself small, I say. *Keeping my head down. Blending. Because attention was dangerous and I had children who needed me alive more than I needed to be everything I actually was.*

Nox says nothing. He just listens.

I held back tonight, My anger cannot be controlled as I process everything with Nox. *Even running through that ward. Even fighting through those soldiers. I held back. I am always holding back. I could feel it. And those children are dead.*

The fury that has been sitting beneath my sternum since the carriage landed, opens up a little further. Not hot. Cold. The kind that doesn't burn itself out.

I want to know who ordered it, I demand. *Who is responsible. I want to know who pulled the string on this and why and what is moving between these kingdoms that nobody is talking about. I want to know because I am done being the person who needs to hide. My children played with those children. My city. My home. The one I chose. I am the Touched and that means something.*

A long pause. Then Nox's voice full of pride: *There she is.*

I do not answer that. But something settles in me. A decision.

The kids cannot come with us, I say.

No.

Calla.

Done. He says it without hesitation. I know the wooden horse is already under her bed and Tavon's good boots have been there since spring.

I look at the twins. Lyra asleep against my shoulder, her hand loosely wrapped around my wrist even in sleep. Tavon at the window, heavy lidded, losing the fight against exhaustion one blink at a time.

I am not asking for permission, I am making a decision.

Yes, Nox says. *You are.* Pride beams down the bond.



Nox sets down in front of Calla's cottage as the sun comes fully up, the red sandstone face behind it catching the morning and throwing it warm and amber across the scrub. The wind chimes on the porch move in the displacement of his wings, bone and copper and glass, layered and discordant, exactly right for this place. The clay pots lining the small wooden porch are overfull and spilling onto the steps, herbs I can name and some I can't, things growing in dry red soil that have no business being there and are anyway.

The blue worn out door opens before we touch down.

Calla stands in the doorway with her hair loose and unbrushed with a clay mug in both hands. She is wearing the dress she had slept in. There are ink stains on her left hand several days old. She looks as if she had known we were coming before we arrived, which she probably had, and as if she has feelings about the hour, which she definitely does.

"You look terrible," she says, looking at me. She takes in the mud and blood mixed together on my clothes and hair.

"Good morning, sister."

Her eyes move to the twins climbing down from the carriage with the careful movements of children who just slept in a flying cart all night. Their legs are shaky. Her face drops in sadness momentarily. She can feel the heaviness and fear still clinging to my children's skin. Then she is crouching down, mug still in both hands, her voice entirely different.

"There are fresh eggs," she says with a soft smile. "And I taught the chickens two new tricks since you were here last. One of them is very impressive and one of them is a complete disaster and I will let you decide which is the disaster."

Tavon looks past her and finds the chicken coop to the side of the cottage and whatever has been sitting on his face since the night before lifts just slightly.

"Which chicken?" Lyra says.

"Matilda," Calla rolls her eyes, "obviously."

That is all it takes. Tavon is already moving toward the coop before Calla finishes standing, Lyra two steps behind him. I let them go. Six years old and a chicken named Matilda is exactly what they need right now and I am not going to take that from them even if I hate having distance between us right now.

Nox lowers his head toward the coop with the careful curiosity of a massive creature who still occasionally forgets the effect he has on smaller animals. One of the chickens— Matilda, I assume, based on the boldness of the maneuver, turns and goes directly for him. Nox pulls back. The chicken advances. Nox huffs a cloud of smoke that does absolutely nothing to deter her.

Lyra laughs. A real one. Small and surprised and then gone almost as fast as it came… but it was real.

Nox straightens with what I can only describe as dignity and announces through the bond that he is going to find food. Calla turns to bow her head to Nox's retreating shadow in silent thanks with which he responds with a slight nod. He takes to the sky without looking back. The twins watch him go and then turn back to the chickens. That is the last I see of them for a while.

She looks at Alaric and Nidmeh with the kind of open curiosity that should feel invasive but somehow doesn't.

"Friends?" She questions.

"Traveling companions," I say.

"Mm." Her eyes go to Alaric's burned arm. Then to Nidmeh's bare feet. Then back to me with an expression that says we will be having a longer conversation very shortly. "Come in then. You two as well, if you like. I have tea."

Alaric looks at the twins in the yard. Then at me. "We'll stay out here."

I nod once and follow Calla inside.



All surfaces in the cottage are occupied by something. Dried flowers hanging from the low ceiling beams. Three unfinished pieces of needlework beside a stack of books with broken spines. A jar of something pale and cloudy on the windowsill that I choose not to ask about. The smell is herbs and woodsmoke and something sweeter underneath, something she is burning for the wards.

Calla hands me something stronger than tea without asking whether I want it. After she finishes making some warm tea for the kids, with honey

obviously to help them calm she says, and water for my traveling companions, she comes back in silently and tilts her head toward the back of the cottage. I follow her.

The back room is where Calla keeps her workings. Shelves of jars. Bundles of dried plants tied with colored string. Symbols chalked on the walls and floor in a pattern I have never fully traced. I leave the door open so I have a straight view out the main door from where Calla and I have been talking.

Alaric is leaning against the porch post. I can hear the kids talking to the chickens and Nidmeh quietly sitting on the wood steps of the small porch.

"Start," she says.

So I do.

I tell her about the attack. The smoke. The bodies in the lane. Bessa. I say that part flat and without elaboration because if I elaborate I would have to stop. I tell her about the barrier the twins made and what it cost the soldier who touched it and what it cost Bessa before they made it. I tell her about Alaric. That he is not a merchant. That something in him reads wrong in a way I have not yet fully mapped and that I have not yet decided what to do about him.

Calla listens. Completely still. Not interrupting.

When I finish she is quiet.

"The twins made a barrier that incinerated a soldier?" she says in wonder.

"Yes. And burned Alaric's arm when he tried to come through."

"At six years old," she states, trying to wrap her head around it.

"Yes."

She absorbs this. "That is not witch power. That is not standard Woken power. That is something I do not have an understanding of."

"Rynn." Her voice is careful, "What are you? What are you actually?"

I look at her. "You know what I am."

"I don't. Not really. What I do know is the court called you ‘The Touched’ when your power broke out at eighteen. I know the words. I am asking what you think you actually are because I have been a witch my whole life and I have never seen a Touched. No one has before you. Sure there are books with the Touched but they don't explain anything of why, how, what can you do and there is nothing older than 500yrs to learn from. And I have never seen children produce something like what you are describing from a standing start with no training and no understanding of what they were

doing. No herbs or chants. Sure witches can do small magic but a magical protective barrier? With nothing?"

"Wonderful. My own sister doesn't know what I am. Add it to the list."

“Rynn, I know you; I just can’t pin down your power.”

"I have been holding back," I say instead. "For eight years. Keeping myself contained because it was safer and safer meant my children kept their mother. And I ran through a burning city tonight past people I could not save because I was running to the twins and that was the right choice and I know it was the right choice but I still cannot stop—" I drop my head in my hands and can feel Calla come closer as if to hug me. But I don't want consoling.

"I am done being—"

Tavon screams.



I am through the door before Calla finishes turning. I am at the door frame as Alaric moves and I leap over Nidmeh's seated frozen frame.

At the front clearing is Tavon on his feet near the chicken coop, his wooden horse dropped in the dirt, his body gone rigid. Lyra is already running toward him, her eyes on his face. Three feet from him something thick and black is coiled in the dry grass, its head drawn back, fixed entirely on my son's left foot.

Alaric is between Tavon and the snake in one second, the short blade in his hand, one motion, clean. The head comes off and the body goes still.

Tavon has not moved. He stands staring at the fangs of the head no longer attached to its body.

Alaric crouches in front of him at eye level. Not touching. "You are all right," he says. The voice of a man who knows how to reach someone who has gone somewhere internal and needs something concrete. "Look at your feet. Both are still there."

Tavon looks at his feet. Then up at Alaric. Then he lets out a breath that is more of a sob and Alaric puts one hand briefly on the top of his head, stands and steps back. I kneel down and Tavon reaches for me to pick him up. I don't normally condone such behavior, trying to let my children learn some

independence but I also need the hug. After a minute I am able to slow my heart and kiss his cheek, looking directly in his eyes. "You are fine. You are safe and you are loved. Calm your heart and go to play. I know the chickens have missed you since the last time we were here."

Calla comes up behind me and looks at the scene and at the body in the dirt and her face moves through several things quickly.

"George!" she says abruptly.

I look at her in question.

"He had a name! I raised him from a hatchling. He kept the mice out of the cottage." She looks at Tavon running off. "He did not know about the children yet. He would have adjusted." A pause. "Probably..." her eyes lost in thought.

Alaric raises an eyebrow at me.

"It is fine," Calla says, with the resolution of someone rearranging their feelings in real time and finding a workable solution. "I will start the animal wards today. Full perimeter. Nothing with teeth or a spine gets through uninvited." She looks at George. "I am sorry. You were a good snake and you held up your end of things."

She strides toward the chicken coop, and I hear her say to the twins in her bright unhurried voice, "Who wants to help me find Matilda? She gets anxious when there is excitement."

I stand at the edge of the clearing and do not move. My feet need a few more minutes to catch up with my brain.

Alaric looks at me. I look at the blade still in his hand, then at Tavon's wooden horse lying in the dirt where he dropped it.

I do not say thank you. I should not have to thank a man for having the instinct to protect a child. That is not gratitude. That is the bare minimum of being human, and I have met dogs with more of it than most men.

But something I had already judged him for shifts anyway. Softer, whether I want it to or not.

Then I look at the blade again, and the softness goes cold. That is not one of his. His are sitting on a low wall in Cadryn where Nox made him leave them, down to the one in his boot.

"Where did you get the blade?"

He smirks at me for a moment, taking his time to answer. I don't have the patience for his games. I narrow my eyes on him. Make it clear that

whatever ground he thought he had gained, he has not gained it. Not with me. Not with a blade and good timing.

"It was on the ground," he says. "Must've been left out." He shrugs and takes a step toward me.

Instinct has me taking a half step back. I hold out my hand, palm up. "Give it to me."

He looks at my hand, then at me. The smirk never leaves his face as he flips the blade and offers it handle first. Easy. Unbothered. Like handing over a spoon. I tuck it into my belt.

"I'll do a sweep of the yard," I say, "to make sure no more weapons were... left out."

"I can do it." He offers it lightly, but I see it for what it is.

I am not stupid, and I am not blind, and men do not work this hard for nothing. A man volunteering to walk the edges of my sister's home alone is a man who wants to learn where everything is. He did not need to stay in that carriage. He could have gone his own way the moment Cadryn started burning. Vanished into the smoke and never been my problem again. Something tells me he would have managed himself just fine, without losing a single hair off his perfect beard.

Why has he spent every day finding reasons to stay three feet from me, long before Cadryn ever burned?

Nox cannot place his blood. Cannot find the thread of it anywhere in what he knows, and Nox knows more bloodlines than any living creature. He told me once that there was something else underneath it, something taken and replaced, something that did not smell like magic born of nature. And under the tattoos, there is a mark that is not decoration. I have learned enough about dark magic to know a binding when I see one.

A man like that does not end up beside a woman like me by accident.

"No," I say. "I will."

So no. He does not get a thank you, and he does not get to wander my sister's home in search of more weapons. He gets my eyes on his back until I understand exactly what he wants.

Our eyes lock and he raises an eyebrow again. "I'll take a look in a little bit anyway. Let's get Nidmeh inside and find some food."

He huffs a laugh and gestures for me to lead. I meant to keep him in front of me. Instead I walk toward the front door with him three feet behind, and

I feel his eyes move over my skin, and shivers run up my back as he watches me.

I'm just going to disregard these fucking shivers as the wind and not because of the man three feet behind me.

There is no wind.



Nidmeh eats like someone who learned long ago not to trust when the next meal is coming, one arm curled around the plate, eyes on the door. Calla pretends not to notice and keeps refilling it. When the plate is clean she slips back outside without a word and folds herself down among the clay pots in the garden, and I let her.

Then I do the sweep. The clearing, the coop, the woodpile, under the porch, along the base of the red rock behind the cottage. I turn over every shape that could hide something. Chickens. Herbs. A rusted hoe. Matilda glaring at me like I am the one who brought a snake into her yard. Not one blade. Not even a nail worth throwing.

So where did he get it?

I find him on the porch steps when I come around the side of the cottage, legs stretched out, looking like a man with nothing to hide. I sit three feet from him, close enough to watch his hands.

"Find anything?" he asks.

"No."

"Then it was just left out." He says it mildly, to the scrub in front of us, and he does not look at me when he says it.

The scrub stretches out in front of us, red rock warm in the midmorning light, the sky going white with heat. From inside I can hear Calla humming while she works and the kids having a much needed nap.

"What is your plan?" I ask.

He is quiet for a moment. "Head back to the North. Let them know the trade route through Cadryn is compromised." He says it evenly, like a man reading off a list.

I look at him. "Let who know?"

"The people I answer to." A pause. "It's complicated."

"Everything about you is complicated."

Something almost like humor moves through his eyes and is gone. "The situation's changed. I need help and solutions before I can continue."

Help and solutions for what? I don’t voice my questions since I refuse to give him any reason to believe I am interested in his tall stature and warrior form. I have my own plans anyway and we will part ways soon.

"Well I am not letting this go unanswered," I say. "What happened in Cadryn. Someone will answer for this. I am going to find out who ordered it and I am going to find out why and do something about it."

He looks at me. Not surprised. "It would be the King of Drenoch who ordered it. How could it be anyone else? I saw you on the ridge. You definitely are Touched. I've only seen the king's guard be able to move that fast."

I am quiet for a moment. Not willing to share my thoughts. Everyone knows the King of Drenoch is a beast of a man but he has never had an issue with Cadryn before. To slaughter all those people who didn't have time to protect themselves, he is obviously trying to make a statement. But why? And if he is moving fully North to take over… to what end? The whole realm? Well, then he is stupid because he wouldn't be able to do that with limited soldiers who are threatened to serve him and slaves. Is someone else pulling the strings? Is there a power he is extracting from? There are so many questions that I cannot go into blind by walking right up to their King.

"I've had some practice." I need to change the subject away from my training. "I know you are just a merchant…" I side eye him and raise my eyebrow in question but continue on "...but if you could get information on the actions of another king, where would you go?"

"That would take some consideration. But if I had to pick a direction, I would say... North."

"Why North?"

He is quiet for a moment. "Korreth is direct in its dealings. My king does not need Drenoch, or anyone else, to do his work for him. He has eyes and ears throughout the realm, and no cause to ally with a place like Drenoch. If you want to know who opened your city, Korreth is where I would start looking."

I look out at the scrub. "And the Touched? In Korreth?" I know Cadryn celebrates the Touched and Drenoch enslaves most everyone who doesn't

fall in line but the other kingdoms? I've never needed to investigate their policies on its people.

"All are tolerated." He says.

Not welcomed. Tolerated. It is honest at least. I can work with honest.

I think about Nidmeh. Sitting in Calla's garden among the clay pots with her eyes finally closed and her shoulders finally down. I have no idea who she is. Nox said she was a witch and insisted she come. I am not leaving an unknown girl with uncertain power with my children. I am also not dragging her north into something she has no part in.

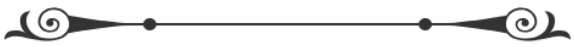
"I haven't decided anything yet," I shrug and stand up to go inside.

He doesn't say anything, just nods his head, keeping his face calm looking out to the desert mountains ahead.

“When are you leaving?” I look down at him.

"Soon. I just need another day or so for my arm to heal up and I'll be on my way."

I nod and head inside.



Calla is waiting for me in the back room. She hands me a fresh cup without a word and looks at my face and waits.

"North," I say.

Something shifts in hers. "How far north?"

"I am not certain yet."

She looks toward the door. "That man. He is from Korreth. I can feel the king's mark on him from across a room. Someone put that on him a long time ago and it is not friendly." A pause. "Is he the reason you are going north?"

"He is part of it."

"And you trust him."

"No, he has an alternative motive." I say. "But I believe he can get me pointed in the right direction."

Calla looks at me for a long moment. Then she sets her mug down and straightens her spine and briefly becomes the version of herself people consistently underestimate.

"I will ward every inch of this property," she says. "Full perimeter. Nothing comes through that I do not personally invite. The children will not be found here." She pauses, and something in her face goes still. "And I will call on Lyssie."

I feel a cold race up my spine in a way that has nothing to do with magic. "Calla. No."

"She was the youngest witch in our line. Even in the afterlife she holds the strongest key connected to our blood." Calla is already moving, pulling a shallow bowl from the shelf, salt from a tin she keeps for exactly this. "A ritual thread to her is worth ten of mine alone. Nothing crosses a boundary she is holding. Not living, not otherwise."

"You have called on her before."

"When I needed to." She does not look up from the bowl.

"It hurts her." She winces as my voice comes out harder than I mean it to. "Mother and Father told us that pulling her back costs her something on the other side. That she comes back to us in pieces of pain. That's why we were never to call on her after she passed, no matter how much we begged mother."

"I know what it costs her." Calla sets the bowl down between us and finally looks at me. "She would do it happily. For them." She does not say their names. She does not have to. "She would do it happily for you."

I look at the bowl, then at her hands, steady in a way mine would not be.

"Rynn." She puts her hand briefly on my arm. "You have spent years making yourself smaller than you are. Whatever is north of here, do not do that anymore. Be seen and do what you need to. Figure out what you are capable of and know that the twins are safe until you come back."

I look at her hand on my arm. Then at her face and we finally embrace for the first time in many years.



A couple hours later, still mid-day, I lie on the floor of Calla's back room with Tavon against my left side and Lyra against my right and I look at the chalked symbols on the ceiling and listen to them breathe. They are exhausted, the adrenaline finally coming down.

Hugging my sister was warm, it was different. I have never been an affectionate person and have never thought about it until now. My children of course I would love on them all day if I could but anyone else? No. I know there was a man I can picture in my mind, I had children with him but I don't recall having him touch me. It feels weird thinking of him. His movements are blurry and still in my mind like we were paper dolls and not moving pictures.

I think about Bessa and Afilo. About the lane. About a child crying from a burning window that I had run past because I had to. I think about what Calla had said. To see what I am capable of.

I press my mouth to the top of Tavon's head. Then Lyra's.

In the bond Nox is quiet and warm and I know he is near.

OceanofPDF.com

CHAPTER ELEVEN

Rynn

The sun is just coming up through the window of the children's room.

The twins are passed out together in Lyra's bed. I'd taken Tavon's instead, since neither of them had wanted to be apart the night before and there wasn't room for three of us in one bed. Calla never has guests, so this room has been taken over by the children since they were old enough to announce it. Tavon is on his stomach with one arm flung off the edge, Lyra curled into herself, small and folded and taking up as little space as she can manage even in dreams. The only sleep either of them has gotten since the attack was in the carriage on the way here, and that hadn't been real rest, just exhaustion winning for an hour at a time. This is the first full night. I want to remember what it looks like in case it doesn't happen again for a while.

The mattress under me is worn thin but smells clean, some credit due, probably, to the symbol carved into the wood above the door. Cleanliness. One of the small charms Calla keeps scattered through the house.

I lie still and listen. The chickens fighting over feed in the coop. The horses whining for their breakfast as my sister walks past the window. Alaric on the couch in the front room, silent as a mouse, close enough that I can feel his presence. Calla hadn't wanted Nidmeh in her workroom, and none of us wanted her alone with a man she barely knew, so Calla's own room was where she'd slept instead.

The smell of dried lavender and mugwort is still strong from the night before, strong enough that it had followed me into sleep. I had used Calla's

herbs to make our mother's relaxing tea, the same one from when I was small enough to think it was only tea and not a thing she made in hushed whispers because it was dangerous to be caught doing it at all. We practiced almost none of our witchcraft growing up. Mother spoke of it daily anyway, quiet, careful, like she was handing me something she needed me to keep whether or not I understood its weight yet. I held onto every word of it like it was ours alone. It was dangerous to be an unregistered witch in Cadryn, but my parents hadn't trusted anyone since Drenoch, registered or not.

The tea had helped. Calla had insisted on the herb bundles over both beds as well, just to be sure, hung from the rafters to guard whatever the twins dreamed. Neither of them had stirred all night.

I dress in the soft morning light without waking either of them and get out of the room without a sound. Alaric is still on the couch, in the same position I'd left him. I can feel that he is awake. I don't stay to confirm it.

I go out to find Calla.

She is already in the yard, crouched at the edge of the property line with a small clay bowl on one knee. She has two fingers dipped in some dark salt-and-ash paste, and she is drawing a line into the packed earth with it. Her hair has come loose from its braid and hangs around her face in pieces. When she looks up at me her eyes are flat and tired. She hadn't slept.

"It held," she says, before I ask. "The whole perimeter. Nothing crossed it."

"You look like something crossed you instead."

"That's how it works." She drags her fingers through the last of the line and sits back on her heels. "She doesn't come without a cost. I told you that."

"I know what you told me."

"I'm not asking you to feel sorry about it." She says it flat, no heat in it. "I would call on her every night for the rest of my life if it kept those two safe for one more hour. Hear that as a fact. Not as something you owe me."

I look down at the line in the dirt. It is thin. It looks like nothing. I would never be afraid of it if I didn't already know what was in it. "How long will it hold without you renewing it?"

"A moon, maybe more, if nothing tests it hard." She stands, wiping her fingers on her skirt, leaving dark streaks she doesn't seem to notice. "If something does test it, I'll know. I'll feel it the way you'd feel a hand closing around your own wrist."

I nod. I don't say what I am actually thinking, which is that I plan to be far away by the time anything tests that line, and that not knowing what will happen here while I am gone already scares me more than anything waiting for me on the road.

I leave her to her work and go to find Nox.



I find him on the ridge above the cottage, where the sandstone turns to bare rock. He is watching the road west. His scales shimmer black in the sunlight like a silk sheet and I step up to him and place a hand on him.

You don't sleep either, I say.

I don't need to, the way you do. He keeps his eyes on the road.

I take out the potion from the shaman and turn it over in my hand. *Do you think this is safe for them to take?*

Shamans are not tricksters. They may not always be clear when they speak, but they don't lie. After you... unblocked me... He says it with a huff. He is still angry about that. Fair enough.

I saw your memories, he continues. *You know it was not by choice, but when you forced that wall down...*

I get it. You're mad. I know it hurt, getting that rush of memories all at once but I needed to be there alone. You didn't need to carry any of the responsibility for what I gave up.

He is silent after that. The shaman's voice comes back to me anyway. Two drops each. No more.

You can test it on that chicken the children call Matilda, and if she doesn't survive it, at least I get a snack. I'm a bit hungry.

You will not eat Matilda! She's everyone's favorite. It isn't her fault she thinks you're her mother hen. I burst out laughing at my own joke.

Nox isn't having any of it. He lifts his head and shakes it out, agitated, like not being allowed to eat her is taking real effort on his part.

You've made your decision about the girl?

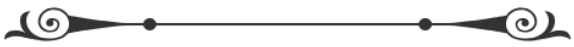
I have.

He doesn't ask what it is. He rarely does anymore. Not because he isn't curious, but because he's learned, the same way I have, that some decisions

need to be walked through before they can be said out loud.

Go, he says instead, *I'll watch the wards from here. If they fail, I'll know before Calla does.*

That is as close to permission as I am going to get, so I take it.



I find her in Calla's garden, kneeling between two rows of rosemary and sage, dirt under her nails, pulling weeds nobody has asked her to pull. Seems Calla was able to find her a pair of shoes that seem to fit and a clean set of clothes. Thank the stars, Calla had healing salves worked through with a touch of her own power. She used them to clean up Nidmeh's skin, reducing the cuts and bruises the crowd had left on her in the human ward. Her eye no longer looks like a fist slammed into it. It’s been a long couple of days and she needed a bath.

I had already made my decision about her that morning, on the porch steps, thinking it through alone. Quiet helps me process. There is a village two hours further west. It is small enough that nobody would look twice at a quiet girl working in a kitchen or minding a shop. I would leave coin with whoever took her in. That wasn't kindness on my part. It was just the only option that didn't get her killed or slow me down, and those were the only two things I actually cared about when I didn't have room to take care of someone.

"I need to talk to you about where you'll stay," I say.

"I'm staying with you."

I haven't even finished the sentence. "That wasn't a question."

She sits back on her heels and looks right at me. She isn't flinching, not the way she usually does around me since I picked her up. "I know you can take care of yourself. I'm not asking you to take care of me." Her hands go still in her lap, folded, deliberate. "I won't be a burden."

"Everyone says that right before they become one."

"I know how to disappear when I need to." Her voice doesn't rise. It doesn't plead. "I know how to eat when no one's feeding me." A pause. She looks like she is deciding how much to tell me and how much to keep to herself. "I've done it before."

I don't ask what she means. I already have a guess. She'd had to find her own means of surviving, and it hadn't looked like she was doing a very good job of it when I found her.

"I am not taking a child with me into whatever this becomes," I say. "I have two of those already. They are mine, and they stay here where it's warded and safe. You are not mine."

"Then why did you take me just to dump me somewhere else?" She challenges me.

I narrow my eyes at her. I am baffled that this girl would question me. She'd always been so weak and timid, and now she is choosing to speak up?

"I'm not asking to be treated like a child." Something changes in her face, fast, gone before I can figure out what it was. "Watch."

She doesn't stand up. She doesn't move her hands. She doesn't say any words under her breath, which is what I'd always assumed witches needed to do. I had never heard the term Touched until I was the Touched. The Touched are only born of witches but whether my power came in late or something wrong happened as a baby, I don't know. So growing up, my mother taught me how witch magic worked. I thought I was just like my sisters back then. It had worked for me though. As a child, I'd heard her whisper words over a dying plant once, so I tried the same chant myself, and it worked. The plant I was directing my words to did in fact heal, but then my father caught me, and that was the end of it. We were allowed to learn about magic. Herbs, tonics, theory. We were never allowed to actually practice it.

Across the garden, Alaric is sitting against the fence post with his boots out in front of him, eyes half closed in the sun. Then his left boot is gone. It is sitting upright in the dirt three feet away, like it had walked there by itself. He opens his eyes, looks down at his bare foot, and frowns at it. A moment ago he had two boots on. Now he only has one, and he has no idea why.

Nidmeh looks back at me, steady. "I'm not a child. I'm just quiet about what I am."

I don't say anything right away. Alaric is still staring at his own foot like it owes him an explanation.

She is a witch. She has spent her whole life keeping her power small enough that nobody has noticed it. And she has just used it to pull a man's boot off his foot from thirty feet away without him feeling a thing. That isn't

nothing. That means she knows exactly how to take what she needs without anyone noticing, until she decides it is time for them to notice.

"That was theft," I say.

"It was proof."

I look at her for a long moment. She doesn't look away, which is more than most grown men manage. Maybe she could be of use to me. Maybe she could help me learn to access some of the magic in me that I've spent my whole life pushing down.

"Get up," I say. "You can come with me, but you follow instructions, and the first time you don't, I put you in that village myself and you don't get a say in it."

Her shoulders drop, just a little letting out a breath. This might be the first easy breath she's taken since the human ward. Either way, she doesn't let me see her relaxed state for long.

She stands up and brushes the dirt off her knees. She looks past me at Alaric, who has picked his boot back up and is turning it over in his hands like the leather itself might explain what has just happened to him.

"He's going to figure it out eventually," she says.

"Let him."



I find Alaric still sitting against the fence post. His boot is back on. He looks annoyed, and underneath that, uneasy, like a man who knows he's just been played but can't prove how.

"Something took my boot," he says. It isn't a question. He is looking for an explanation, like he thinks I had something to do with it.

"The wind, probably."

He just raises an eyebrow at me.

"I don't know what to tell you." I smile at him, as innocently as I can manage, and watch his jaw tighten. That small reaction is satisfying enough on its own.

He looks at me a moment longer. Then he decides the boot isn't worth arguing about and shakes his head like he's let it go.

"You should go on ahead now," I say. "Your arm is healed. You're welcome for the cream, by the way."

That stops him mid-thought. "North."

"North, or wherever you need. I'm not ready to leave yet."

His eyes narrow. "I thought we were traveling together."

That tells me something, and it pulls me in the opposite direction of him. He'd assumed I would go with him? I had never said I was going North specifically. I haven't forgotten what he'd said about his King, that his King might be a good place to start looking for answers, for whoever was responsible, or for allies to help get justice. I don't even know if King Kuyprus is still alive after that attack. He is definitely hiding something. Nox had already told me he didn't know the political status of Korreth, or much about its people at all. Only that it was cold, and that he preferred the warm weather.

"Look. Thank you for your insight on your King." I keep my voice even, but stern. "I may search that path. But the twins slept through the whole night for the first time since the attack. I'm not pulling them out of that just to keep to your schedule. Calla needs another day to finish the wards before I trust this place with my children in it. Nidmeh needs a horse that'll tolerate her and boots that fit before we go anywhere near a mountain pass." I stop. "You have somewhere to be. Go be there."

Something moves behind his eyes. For a second I think he'll argue, push the North on me, tell me there is no reason we can't travel together. He does neither. That tells me something, even if I don't know what yet.

"You're certain?" he says.

"I'm certain I'm not leaving my children here with the wards half finished." I hold his eyes long enough to make sure he understands I'm not negotiating twice. "If I decide to go North, we'll catch up."

He doesn't say anything for a few seconds. When he finally speaks, all the warmth from the garden is gone from his voice. "I don't like the idea of you traveling alone."

"You don't have to like it, and I'm not explaining myself further. Thanks for..." I swing my arms out, gesturing vaguely around us, trying to land on something worth thanking him for. "...killing George. It's time for you to go now."

I am getting annoyed now. I don't need anyone trying to dictate my actions, except Nox, and even that isn't by choice. Alaric has too many

secrets, and I no longer care to find out what they are. I just know we can't put wards up if he's still inside the perimeter.

He looks at me a moment longer. I think he is about to say more but then he nods once and turns toward the horse Calla had already saddled for him this morning. Some part of him must have known this was coming.

I watch him ride out from the edge of the property. His horse takes the western trail at an easy pace.

He agreed too easily, I mull over with Nox.

I noticed too. Nox keeps watching the trail long after Alaric has gone small on it. *Maybe he really was just romantically interested in you after all, and you shutting that door left him with nothing left to do but leave.*

I'm not so sure…

Calla had ensured he had some food and supplies tied up on his horse before he left. She would not have a guest leaving her home without being properly sent off. Plus the forests headed up to the North are rumored to be the home of monsters. I think those are just stories thrown around by kings to ensure their people don't try leaving to other kingdoms so easily but yet merchants travel all the time. Yes some are lost along the way but that could easily be explained… eats the wrong plant and dies, has a second family and never comes back to the first, or bandits on the roads looking for an easy hit.

Alaric has nothing to worry about and would've been just fine on his own without so many supplies. At minimum he is a fighter of some kind and fighters know how to hunt their own food. Merchants don't get legs like that from riding routes. This is the third time I've noticed his pants tight in a way that has nothing to do with fit. I lose the thread of what I'd been thinking. Unhelpful.



Calla brings out the wine after the twins go down for the night. I slip the tonic into their tea before sleep. I tested it on different chickens just in case and after a couple hours, neither Nox nor I could feel anything off with them, so we agree it is good enough for the children to ensure an extra layer of protection was on them while I am away.

Calla also brings a small clay dish with something dried and greenish in it, and she crumbles it over a dish of coals until the room smells like sweet sage. She sets it near Nidmeh without saying much about it, which is how she handles most things that actually matter. She just tells her it will settle whatever her body is still carrying from the last week, if she wants it to.

Nidmeh looks at me before she looks at the smoke. That is how she looks at most things she isn't sure she is allowed to want.

"It's fine," I say.

She breathes it in slowly. By her second glass of wine, her shoulders have finally come down from where she usually holds them, high and tight near her ears. She actually looks like she is resting.

She talks more than I have ever heard her talk.

Not about the attack. Not directly. She talks around it, the pain in her words tells me enough. She tells us about the market stalls she used to work as a kid. Quick fingers, quicker feet. She says she learned to lift a coin purse before she learned her letters, because one of those kept her fed and the other one didn't. She says it flat, like she is talking about the weather. I know that tone. I use it myself, on the things I'd also decided didn't matter anymore.

"There was a place," she says. She is turning her cup slowly in her hands, not drinking from it. "In the Underground. Women worked there. I thought if I looked like them, dressed like them, maybe the money..." She stops and starts again from somewhere further back. "I was eleven. The woman who ran the place took one look at me and put me on laundry instead. I thought that meant she was being kind."

Calla doesn't move. I don't either.

"It wasn't kindness," Nidmeh says. Her voice has gone quiet. The wine and the smoke are pulling something loose that has been tied down for a long time. "It just meant I wasn't ready for that yet. Somebody decided later that I was. Nobody asked me." Her hands go still around the cup. "After that, a man in the ward took me in. Everyone thought that was a kindness too."

She doesn't say any more than that. I don't ask her to. Some things get handed to you in pieces because the whole thing costs too much to give away all at once. I learned a long time ago that the right thing to do with a piece like that is not reach for the rest of it.

"Nobody in that ward ever asked me anything," she says instead. She is looking at the fire, not at either of us. "Not once. Not what happened to me. Not what I wanted. They just decided what I was and treated me like that was true." She finally looks up. She looks right at me, not at Calla. "You didn't ask either. On the road."

"I didn't need to."

"That's the part I don't know what to do with." Her voice cracks a little at the edges. It doesn't break, but I can hear the seam in it.

I don't have an answer for that, so I don't try to give her one. I refill her cup instead. That is the only kind of comfort I've ever been good at giving anyone. I let the fire and the smoke handle the rest of what she isn't ready to say out loud yet.

Calla catches my eye once, across the room. Neither of us needs to say anything. We'd both grown up watching children get handed to the world with nobody standing between them and it. We've both spent every year since then figuring out what to do with the fact that we survived it, and other people didn't.

Nidmeh falls asleep in the chair before the fire burns all the way down. Her cup is still half full. For once her face isn't arranged into anything. It is just her face.

I sit with her longer than I need to. I don't want to leave her alone with what she'd just said out loud for the first time.

Calla waits until Nidmeh's breathing has gone slow and even before she speaks.

"You used to touch people," she says quietly, looking at the fire instead of at me. "Not much. But you used to. You'd put your hand on Gael's arm without thinking about it. You used to lean into things instead of away from them."

"I don't know what you want me to say to that."

"I'm not asking you to say anything. I'm telling you I see it." She finally looks at me. "You became something softer with Gael, and I liked her. Since you got here, I've felt you different. Or rather the same as you were in the human ward. Since your power broke through. Watching you sit here now like touching another person costs you something."

I don't answer right away. The fire pops once, low. The shaman had taken more than expected. The grief is gone, which left an empty black hole in my chest, but other than the pain she removed, she took the one thing keeping

my mask in place. Had taken the part of me that knew what it felt like to be touched like I mattered. Loved without expecting something in return. I haven't understood until just now, sitting in my sister's warmth, exactly what that trade has cost.

She just reaches over and puts her hand flat against my back, between my shoulder blades, and leaves it there until I stop counting my breaths. The cost is higher than I expected but I would still choose it over the memories of Lyssie.

OceanofPDF.com

CHAPTER TWELVE

Rynn

I am awake before the sun comes up. The cottage is quiet as I take my clean clothes and shower supplies outside.

Nox? I mentally nudge him to wake up. I get a grumble as a response.

I need to use my magic to heat the water in the well for my shower. Show me.

Trees start to sway and then just split all together as Nox appears as he leaves what seems to be a nest created amongst the dense trees. There must be 50 trees all smashed down flat on the ground creating a large circle opening in the canopy behind my sister's cottage. She is not going to be so happy he has killed those trees, I think with a shrug.

I am not a Touched. I am also not a witch. I am a dragon. He lowers his head to the ground in front of me, settling in as if not quite ready to be out of his nest.

Obviously. I fold my arms and pop out my hip to tap my foot on the ground to display my irritation at his obvious claim.

You are old. Surely you know something about how to get started? Some gossip you've heard from other dragons who had bonded with The Touched? I continue to tap my foot on the hard dirt ground.

There are no dragons I have met who have ever been bonded. There are no Touched to be spoken of. Yes we know The Touched and its chosen dragon are bonded at the child's birth but there is nothing more I can say on the matter. Nox says. I don't like how ominous he is about this but I am getting cold and the kids will be up soon.

Are you telling me after all these years you have tried to get me to practice or strengthen my gifts and you don't even know how to help me do it? I might as well just…

Enough. Nox stops my rising irritation. *No need for witches symbols. You are Touched and have all the magic you need inside. Try to feel it in your chest. Before I summon fire, first I feel it in the center of my chest. Find the source inside you.*

I close my eyes and take a breath. I can feel my body itching to move, to throw myself into my training to get my arms shaking and my mind to stop going backwards but there is no time for training now.

Nox is patiently waiting as I just keep breathing. My mind jumps from the kids to the attack, to Bessa, to the kid who jumped on Tavon in the pool and my heart starts racing, fingers fisting.

Calm down and breathe, Nox instructs.

Heat tears up my spine and across my shoulder blades, so sharp I am certain something is burning me from the inside. I open my eyes. I am staring straight at the well.

It explodes.

Water shoots up and out of it in a single violent burst, like something massive had been dropped into it from below rather than thrown in from above. That alone doesn't make sense. The well isn't deep enough for water to reach that high on its own, not from a drop, not from anything short of the whole thing detonating from underneath.

The stones ringing the well's edge, the ones Calla had spent an afternoon setting carefully in place so no one would step into the hole by accident, are gone. Not knocked loose. Gone, thrown outward in every direction along with the water, raining back down around me in pieces.

Nox has already thrown his wing over my body, pinning me flat against the ground. The membrane above me is nothing like the thin, veined stretch near the wingtips, the kind you could almost see light through if the sun hit it right. This part is thick, ridged where it folds close to the bone at his shoulder, dense enough that when a piece of stone strikes it, the sound is a dull crack instead of a tear. I hear rock after rock hit the wing above me and drop away. Nothing comes through.

The stones stop falling. I feel Nox's wing lift away from my back, slow, like he is checking to see if the sky is done throwing things at us before he lets me move.

I get up. My knees and palms are coated in mud, water pooling everywhere across the ground that has nowhere left to drain. I walk toward the well anyway, stepping through it, my boots sinking with each step.

I reach the edge and look down.

There is no water in it. Not a drop. The well that had just launched itself into the air a moment ago sits completely dry at the bottom, like something had reached in and drained it whole in the same breath it had emptied out.

Behind me, the cottage door bangs open. Calla, Nidmeh, and the twins are crowded into the doorway, all of them frozen there, staring past me at the wreckage of stone and mud scattered across the yard.

No one says anything.

"Morning!" I say in my most chipper voice I can manage.

"Mama… your chest," Lyra says, pointing at me.

I look down. Light is glowing faintly through the fabric over my shoulders, fading even as I blink. I can still feel it too, a thin line of heat tracing over my collarbone like something had just finished burning its way across my skin. Then the pain stops. Just like when I was eighteen. I am in awe but snap out of it because of the several eyes staring at me.

"All is well, loves. Just a little morning exercise that got a little out of hand. No worries, we are all fine," I say, walking as fast as I can to my children to direct them back into the house. As I pass Calla, I try to convey with my eyes a "what the hell did I do" look before heading in.

The kids get settled and I am able to detour the conversation over to Nidmeh and me leaving. The twins instantly forget all about what happened outside and cling to my legs. "It's ok. Calla misses having some alone time with you two. I won't be gone too long and will even bring you back a gift!" I say, which seems to help Tavon calm a bit.

"Can it be a horse, mama?" he says.

"I will try my best to get you a TOY horse and Lyra those colored inks you love so much." I squat down to kiss them both on their heads. "I love you more than the whole sky loves—"

"Stars!" they shout back. I grab them both and roll them to the ground, tickling one as my face is buried in the other's neck leaving dramatic tickling kisses and then switch.

Calla says she will be able to make a rune in the well to bring the water back and the kids will have a fun project of finding and painting stones to remake the well's wall structure. She puts a protection barrier around the

hole to keep back any kids or animals that might miss the giant hole in the ground. Nidmeh and I unfortunately have not showered but we couldn't wait much longer to start our journey North.

Nox is already waiting, wings half open, watching the door. Nidmeh is on her horse already sitting up tall as if she is going to dare me to change my mind about her coming along. Her skin looks sallow and washed out. I don't know how familiar she is with drinking but that along with my sister's smoke… she better not throw up on that horse.

"You both listen now to your auntie and help around the house. Calla…" She gently grabs the children and steers them off of me and holds them as they press into her sides. "Do not teach them any magic that ends with something on fire."

"No promises," Calla says, already crouching down to the twins' height, with a glint in her eye she gets right before she is about to ruin someone's afternoon. "Who wants to learn the sneezing rune?"

Tavon's hand shoots up before Lyra's does.

My chest goes tight seeing my children be so happy and the thought of leaving them. I don't let it show on my face. I make myself smile before I turn around, so that is the last thing they will see. That is the one thing about me that has never gotten harder to do, no matter how bad things get.

Calla stands in the doorway with her arms crossed.

“You are different. I know you just went through hell but inside… you feel different but also familiar?” I lower my gaze not wanting to have this conversation with her.

“I know. I’ll explain another time but I am fine. I will find out the cause of this attack and who is responsible.”

“Why you? You have two children that need you. Let the King deal with it.”

"I can't sit by after what was done. It's screaming in my bones to fix it, find them, end it. I haven't used my power, not really, but I will. I feel like this is mine to do. Justice for all of them." My voice breaks.

"I don't know how to explain it so it makes sense. I just know I have something in me bigger than any Woken carries. I killed that man protecting you, years ago, and I didn't even understand what I was doing. I sense things others can't. I just made your well explode without trying. Woken only get one power. I have more, somehow, and I just need to practice."

She pulls me into a hug. "Come back for them." Her voice is full of unbroken tears. "Not eventually… but come back."

"I will."

"I know you will." She looks at me the way our mother used to, when she wanted something understood without having to say it twice.

The two horses are sturdy animals and I feel their excitement for the journey ahead. Nox won't carry a second rider. He'd made that clear the first time I brought it up, in a tone that told me not to bring it up again.

I will not have her on my back, he said. *She is not you. She is not mine.*

I didn't push it further.

Calla stocked up our horses with a week's worth of dried fruits and meats along with new clothes for Nidmeh. I already had some clothes here that I packed up and got my extra weapons strapped onto Nox just in case.

We ride, and Nox flies above us wherever the terrain opens up enough for him to do it. His shadow crosses the trail ahead of us, then behind us, then ahead again.

Alaric has a full day on us already. If the roads North are as direct as Calla's map made them look, he could be past the tavern and well into the climb by the time we catch up to him, if we catch up to him at all. I tell myself that is fine. I hadn't asked him to wait and it's better to leave things as they were. A couple of people who met at a Solenne and have some shared trauma over some killings and mayhem.



By the time the light starts to go gold and long across the trail, my legs are numb from the saddle. I don't recall ever having issues from the trips Gael and I would go on all those years ago, or maybe I've just forgotten what it feels like to ride all day, stopping only to rest the horses, stretch, or duck into the brush when nature demands it. Nox finds us a clearing before I have to ask, dropping out of the sky in a rush of wind that flattens the grass and makes both horses sidestep hard enough that Nidmeh has to grab the pommel.

"Warn a person," she says, glaring up at him.

I do not think a warning is necessary, Nox says, entirely unbothered by her tone.

Helpful, I think back at him, not bothering to hide the sarcasm.

I swing down and my knees buckle for one step before they remember how legs work. My desert clothes have done exactly nothing since noon. The wrap I've had over my shoulders since Cadryn is fine for wind but not for the cold that's started creeping in once the trees thickened, blotting the sun. I dig through my pack for the wool cloak Calla shoved at me before we left, muttering something about her sister being an idiot who thought weather worked the same everywhere. She was right, as usual. I pull it on over the desert layers instead of swapping anything out. Cold enough for both. I'm going to die in the North.

Nidmeh has already gone still beside her horse, staring at the trees like she expects something to walk out of them. "They don't bite," I say, nodding at the treeline.

"Everything bites eventually." She says it flat, not a joke, and starts unbuckling her bedroll like she's decided arguing with me about it isn't worth the energy. I get started on the fire, pulling out my flint and a curl of dry bark shaved thin enough to catch. Before I have a chance to hit the flint, she crouches down next to me and puts two fingers into the kindling. "I can do it faster," she says, and there's a challenge in it, small and quiet, like she expects me to tell her to back off.

"Alright, do it." I sit back on my heels.

Her fingers shake slightly and I notice they don't glow the way mine have when my power comes out. Hell, my whole body seems to glow but with her there is nothing dramatic. She just holds them there, eyes closed, and a thread of warmth builds under the bark until it catches on its own like it's been burning for an hour already. She looks almost surprised it works, like she still isn't used to being allowed to try. "Handy," I observe. She lets out a breath and seems to perk up at my response.

"I can hide things too. Not big things. Sound, mostly. Smoke, if it's small enough." She glances at the fire, contemplating for a moment and then her eyes come back to mine. I see the courage building as she tentatively decides to ask, "I could pull the light down low enough that nothing on the ridge sees it, if you want. Won't stop something already close, but it'll stop somebody a mile off from bothering to come look." There is hope in her eyes but with her head angled down I can tell she is prepared to be scolded.

"Let's see it then." Her eyes widen for a moment and then quickly turn to the fire. She curls her hand loosely around the flame without touching it, and the light drops, not out, just down, dimming to something that won't carry past the treeline. The heat doesn't change. Just the light. Small magic. I understand now what Nox means about witches, forced to be careful with what little they're given, and getting good at using every scrap of it. My sister is a witch too, but I rarely see her use her own magic. She leans on herbs and chants instead. Our parents were both witches. Nidmeh's magic isn't foreign to me. Just different in how she reaches for it, straight from her hands, nothing between her and the magic.

We eat dried meat and hard bread with a fistful of the dates I packed. They don't spoil and are the best to travel with but this meal reminds me of a different time. A harder time… I shake the memories away trying to come up. I split half of my meat for Nidmeh because she hasn't eaten since the last time we stopped. I go to hand it to her and her hands have gone tight, pale-knuckled again as she slowly takes the food.

"You don't have to keep doing that," she says, chewing.

"Doing what?"

"Feeding me like I'm one of your kids." She stares hard at the ground.

"You're not eating enough to keep up tomorrow. This is not kindness." I say lightheartedly and nudge her arm trying to keep her from retreating back into herself. It's good she has learned to keep distance from people. Not show her true self. But seeing her hopefulness and excitement early while using her magic to help, tells me her walls are not as strong. Yet. She is still a kid and some part of me that never was given the space to feel safe, wants to give that to her.

She almost smiles. It doesn't quite make it all the way there, but it moves in that direction, which from her, I'm learning, counts as a lot. We lay out one bedroll each on either side of the fire, close enough to share the heat, far enough that neither of us has to feel the other breathing. I tell her I'll take first watch. She doesn't argue, and is asleep before I've finished banking the coals down for the night. I sit with my knees pulled up and my back against my pack and look up through the gap in the trees where Nox crushed a clean hole in the canopy landing.

Stars, most of them, though not as many as home. The pines are already starting to close in at the edges of that hole, and I make myself stop looking at how small the opening is getting each mile north. Nox doesn't say

anything. He doesn't have to. I can feel him somewhere off in the dark, past the firelight, awake the same as me, and that's enough for one night.

OceanofPDF.com

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

Rynn

The second day starts clear and ends nothing like it.

We ride out before full light, mist still sitting low in the hollows between the trees. Nidmeh keeps pace beside me without needing to be told the direction anymore, which tells me she trusts the horse more than she trusted it yesterday.

“Can I ask you something?” she says, out of nowhere, eyes on the trail instead of me.

“You can ask.”

“Your husband. The one who found you.” She hesitates like she’s testing how far the ice holds before she puts her full weight on it. “Everyone knows the story of how you two met. Him coming to the human ward to locate the lost Touched. How your power erupted because of a man trying too... Nevermind. I heard your husband died a couple years ago. What exactly happened? No one is quite clear on it.”

No. Absolutely not. I feel the answer rise up out of somewhere old and press it back down before it reaches my mouth. I am not doing this, not on a horse, not with the sun barely up, not with someone I’ve known for four days.

“Hungry?” I say instead, easy, like the question didn’t cost me anything. “You didn’t eat when you got up.”

“I had bread an hour ago.”

“Not enough. Eat more at the next stop.”

I nudge my horse half a length ahead of hers, enough that it isn’t rude, enough that the conversation has to either die or follow me. “How’d you get so light on your feet back at the ward?” I need the subject changed now.

She’s quiet for a moment, like she noticed exactly what I did and decided to let me get away with it anyway.

“You get fast or you get caught. I got fast.”

“Caught doing what exactly?”

“Whatever there was to take. Bread first. Then coin, when I got better at it.” She says it timidly, testing me to see if I will reprimand her. When I don’t, she continues, “Nobody taught me. I just watched the ones still alive and copied what they did.”

“Well you obviously were good at it if you were never arrested.” She winces at my words and I give her the time she needs to decide if she wants to share more.

Her jaw works hard. I see the muscles strain before she answers. "I wandered somewhere I shouldn't have, once. Ended up in the low market instead of a cell. A madam took me in. Dishwater work, mostly. Kept me out of the rooms because of my age. Not everyone respected that."

I don't ask her to say more. Something in the set of her shoulders tells me I shouldn't push.

"One of the men didn't like being told he couldn't have me. He went around back after Madam Hannit threw him out." Her voice doesn't change, flat and unemotional. As if she has told herself this story enough times that it stopped being about her and started being about someone else. "He waited for me to take out the trash and grabbed me… I thought I knew pain before but… I didn't. The man I’ve been staying with, in the human ward, found me after. I was dumped in the streets with the humans and they all saw me but no one cared. Some even spit on me. I could barely move or see. My eyes were so dry and painful. Too many blood vessels popped when… Jerik is the reason I lived. He cleaned me up and was very careful not to expose my bloodied body as much as possible."

"What was he like?"

"Not what you'd hope." She says it fast, like she wants the sentence over before either of us has to sit inside it. "I was with him five years before you showed up. He never laid a hand on me the way you're thinking. But sometimes I wished he would've. Been done with it sooner rather than the performances… " She looks at me, eyes distant and full of pain. "He just

liked to watch me while he… it was fine because I wasn't touched and I had a safe bed."

Anger rises in me and the trees around us start to sway. "That wasn't safe, Nidmeh. That is just as cruel if not more." It's hard for me to keep the fire from my voice so she does not feel it is aimed at her.

She huffs a laugh and tries to brush it off, "No one's ever actually asked me any of that before. I didn't mean to say all of that. I'm sorry if I made you uncomfortable."

I don't push. "If you are feeling up to talk I will listen. Nothing you say will make me uncomfortable." I try to continue with an easier topic to steer away from this heavy cloud that's settled between us. "How old are you? Let me guess... Fourteen?" She laughs and puffs her chest up a little.

"I am sixteen actually, or at least that's my guess. My madam declared me eleven when she took me in since I don't remember my parents. I've always just remembered surviving." Well that's depressing and definitely not the direction I was hoping for.

"Ok miss sixteen, since you are unsure do you have a month in mind or a date picked out for your birthday?" I put on my best sassy voice to help put a smile on her face even if my heart and mind see darkness and rage. This is my ultimate power, my two faces. I can hold myself together.

She brightens up at that. Thank the stars. "Yes! I have chosen July 29th. July because peaches came in cheap that time of year, so the baker went generous with the scraps. Hand pies, mostly, more filling than crust. 29th because after twenty-eight failed tries at picking a pocket, I finally got it right on the twenty-ninth!"

"I think that is a wonderful choice for a birthday." I am still irritated Nox made me bring Nidmeh and literally pluck her off the streets but seeing her open up and sit a bit taller makes me feel proud. Like I'm not just keeping my head down and voice quiet to appease the king, but that I can actually contribute to something. I helped this young woman by carrying a bit of her weight. All the people that considered me "friend" in Cadryn, I never really listened to what they had to say but Nidmeh. I listened.



By midmorning the sky has gone the color of a bruise just starting to come up, yellow-green at the edges instead of blue, and the wind changes twice inside an hour, first pulling from the west and then, without any warning, swinging hard from the north and carrying the smell of rain before a single drop has fallen.

Storm coming in fast. Get moving now. Nox says through the bond at the same moment a gust of wind whips my hair across my face.

Nidmeh is off her horse just inside the trees at the edge of the path. She picks a bad time to pee. Her horse sidesteps into mine, spinning us both around. The wind keeps pushing, spooking the animals harder by the minute.

"Nidmeh! Out here now, it's time to go!" I yell over the wind.

She comes running back through the trees, still fixing her pants.

Nox drops low out of the clouds instead of holding his place above us, close enough now that I can feel the wind off his wings on top of the storm's own. He's never flown this close to the ground in open sky, not once, not in weather like this. Lightning is already tearing the clouds apart above him, and I understand before he has to say it. Up there, he's the tallest thing for miles.

Pressure builds in my chest, a headache forming right behind my eyes, sharp in a way I don't recognize. I've never felt anything like this before, not from any storm, not from any use of power I've witnessed. Whatever this is, it's new.

I grab a band from my wrist to tie my hair into a low bun.

There's a building two miles ahead, on the road. Get inside before this breaks.

The sun disappears behind the clouds and the sky goes fully dark. White light cracks across the whole sky, and the loudest sound I've ever heard vibrates straight through my bones. Then it pours.

This is not typical weather behavior. Go now.

We ride hard, and the rain doesn't let up once it starts. It comes in sideways, cold enough to sting, and Nidmeh loses her hood twice trying to keep it up one-handed while she rides. The building comes into view half a mile out, a low dark shape through the water coming down in sheets, and by the time we reach it the road under the horses has gone to mud that sucks at their hooves with every step.

I think Nidmeh is yelling something at me. I can't make out a word of it over the wind and the thunder that keeps splitting the sky in half. I lift an elbow in her direction, the closest thing to an answer I can manage without losing the reins.

We get the horses under the eave at the side of the building, and my hands are shaking. Either from my white knuckled grip or from the cold but I am struggling to manage the knots properly. Nidmeh comes up and is also shaking like a leaf. “How did you…” She takes the reins from me and loops them around the wood post. Wrapping her hands around the wood with the reins between, she closes her eyes and breathes. For a split second I think about ripping the reins away from her, sure the horses won't stay put with the rope just looped over. But before I can speak she removes her hands and there is a knot in the reins.

I stare at them for a good ten seconds before she heads to her pack smiling. We grab what we can carry, and leave the rest strapped down under what little cover the eave gives.

“You think you're so good huh?” I say following her towards the door.

“Feels good using my magic.” She replies with a pep in her step.

I shake my head, huffing a laugh. This girl. "Just watch your back. Unregistered witches aren't welcome in some places."

She drops her head. It isn't hard to guess, not with her raised in the human ward and everything she's already told me about her history.

The lightness goes out of me before I mean it to.

"I'm serious," I say. "You can't just—"

Thunder cracks hard enough to swallow the rest of it. Whatever I meant to say gets lost somewhere between my chest and my mouth, buried under the pressure still building behind my eyes.

We shove through the door together, and it slams shut behind us against the wind.

The room goes quiet.

Someone's playing something low and slow on a stringed instrument near the back, and it falters, then stops. Every head in the room turns toward the door, toward us, and stays there. We must look like something dragged in off the road and left to dry, hair plastered flat, clothes soaked through and clinging, mud to the knee on both of us, breathing too hard from the ride and the cold.

The innkeeper starts talking before I've caught my breath, something about rooms, how many, how long. I can't focus enough to follow him. The pressure from outside hasn't let up, it's sitting behind my eyes and down through my chest, and it's pulling my attention in every direction except the one I need it. I ask him to repeat himself. He does, slower, like he thinks I'm simple rather than half-drowned and reeling.

My shawl has slipped off one shoulder somewhere between the horses and the door. I don't notice until the innkeeper's eyes catch there and stop.

He doesn't finish the sentence he was in the middle of. He reaches under the counter, pulls two keys off the board without checking which rooms they belong to, and presses them into my hand.

"My Lady." He says it like the words cost him something to get out fast enough. "Whatever you need, whatever room, it's yours. I should have known the moment you walked in. Forgive me."

Then he's around the counter and reaching for our things before I can tell him not to bother, already talking about towels, a fire, whatever we need.

He's an older man, older than I register until his hands are already on our bags, and I grab his wrist before I've decided to, harder than I mean to.

"Don't touch these... please." I try to put on a smile but it's tight and doesn’t reach my eyes. The room's become quiet, watching. The old man's eyes go wide and wet, and it takes me a second too long to understand why. I let go.

He's scared of me. He grabs his wrist and just stares at me.

He isn't the only one. Behind him, a man at a corner table has gone very still, and the woman across from him is watching me with wide eyes. Nobody here knows what I am beyond the word for it. Touched. They know the King treats it like something sacred, and so they believe it.

People don’t question him, and whatever they feel coming off me keeps the rest of their questions where they belong, unasked. Even I don't have real answers, not for lack of trying. Every time I've pushed the King for something solid, he hands me gratitude instead, how blessed I am, how lucky, never anything that resembles a fact. There isn't a single book on what I am. If there were, I'd have found it by now.

Out here, this far from Cadryn, I don't know if they feel it the same way people do at home but judging by the old man's face, it might be simpler than that. It might just be fear, plain and unshaped by anything the King's ever told them to feel.

I unclench my jaw before I say more in the near silent room. The room holds its breath. I focus on keeping my tone gentler now. "If you want to help, you can grab what's left on the horses."

My face settles, slower than I'd like.

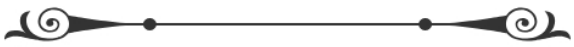
What has gotten into me? It's as if since the attack, I can't keep the dark parts of myself contained anymore. They keep finding their way out.

Waiting for the man to return from our horses, I still can't get warm. I still can't get the pressure out of my chest. I'm still wringing water out of my braid when the smell reaches me.

Under the wet wood and the tallow candles and the stew cooking somewhere in the back, there's ozone. Storm, sharp and electric, and it isn't coming from outside anymore. It's coming from someone in this room, clinging to him the same way the rain is clinging to me.

I lift my head in the direction.

Alaric is already looking at me from across the bar, like he's been waiting to see how long it would take.



“Are you following me now?” I ask, stopping an arm's length away, close enough that the ozone smell gets worse instead of better. Under it, though, there's something else. Cedar, maybe, and something warmer beneath that, like his skin gives off heat instead of just holding it in, and for one useless second I forget what I was angry about.

“I got here yesterday.” He leans back against the bar like the conversation is nothing, like the storm outside isn’t sitting on his skin. “Roads only run one direction up here. Wasn’t hard to guess where you’d end up.”

“So that's a yes.”

He doesn't answer that either, just watches me with that same unreadable calm, like the storm outside is a weather pattern instead of something he made happen.

I don't have it in me to keep pulling at this right now. Not soaked through, not with a headache still lodged behind my eyes, not after scaring an old man half to death without meaning to. Whatever game he's playing, it can wait until I'm not freezing and starving in the middle of it.

"I need a room and something hot to eat," I say instead. "We can do this after."

He doesn't argue. If anything, something in his face eases, like he'd been ready for a fight he didn't actually want yet either.



The room the innkeeper gives me, one of the two keys now sitting on the washbasin's edge, the other already gone with Nidmeh down the hall, is small and plain, a bed, a window rattling faintly with the last of the wind outside. The water in the basin is cold, and cold is the last thing I need right now. For one long moment I stand over it with my hands hovering above the surface, thinking about how easy it should be to warm it. One thought, maybe less.

I pull my hands back instead. I am not doing that again, not after the well, not after watching stone fly past Nox's wing because I couldn't hold something as simple as heat. I debated asking Nox to pop his head in and heat a rock for me from outside, but he'd probably just make me practice again, and I don't have the energy to sleep outside tonight when I inevitably explode this whole inn.

I scrub the mud off with water that makes my teeth ache and don't complain, not even to myself.

I wring out my braid properly this time, redo my adara with what's left in my small pouch, iron black across my cheekbone, copper clay beneath my eye, the vertical line at my chin, all of it in under four minutes even with my hands still stiff from the cold. It steadies something in me. Then I dig through my pack for the softest thing I own, a loose linen tunic gone thin from wear, long enough to fall past my knees, and pull it on over leggings I've had since before the twins were born. Not fashion. Just warmth, and something that doesn't cling to me the way my wet clothes did for the last couple hours.

By the time I make it back downstairs, the storm has thinned to a steady patter on the roof instead of the assault it was an hour ago, and someone has put a bowl of stew and a single loaf of bread in front of an empty seat at the bar like they knew I'd come find it.

Alaric is still there. Of course he is.

I eat without looking at him for as long as I can manage it, which isn't as long as I'd like.



"Nice weather we're having," I say, waving over the older man now behind the bar.

His mouth turns up on one side, and he raises an eyebrow, turning fully to me. He knows exactly what I'm accusing him of and decides not to make it easy. "What are you accusing me of, Rynn?"

I prop my right elbow on the table, lean my head against my fist, and face him fully, raising my brow to meet his. His eyes hold mine, and there is a roaring storm in the middle of the ocean bright with the challenge.

"The storm." I nod at the window, at the water sliding sideways down the glass. "That's not normal. That's engineering."

Before Alaric can reply, I turn to the old man. "Sorry about earlier." I lift my voice into the airy, quaint sound I've practiced for years and put on my sincere smile, playing shy. His face softens, and his shoulders finally drop.

"It's no trouble, honey. Your friend's already eaten and gone up for the night. Not much of a talker, that one. Do you know how long you plan on staying?"

"Just the night. We'll be off first thing." I look him dead in the eyes, softening mine. "Could I trouble you for something stronger than water? It would help after such a journey."

That's the key, looking straight into people's eyes. It makes them feel put on the spot, turns their focus inward, takes it off me.

"Yes, of course! Right away, I'll bring out our best whiskey for you and your gentleman here." He turns to look at Alaric, visibly swallows his words, and manages a shaky smile before disappearing to the back.

“Storms turn.” He shrugs, easy, unbothered, and if I didn’t know what I was smelling I might believe him. “It’s the mountains. Does strange things to the air up here.”

"You reek of it." My voice comes out flat, stripped of the warmth I'd just handed the innkeeper a breath ago. Even I notice the difference.

That gets something out of him, the smallest flinch around his eyes, gone before it settles into anything I could call a reaction. “Careful. A woman who can smell my magic might start to think she knows things about me she shouldn’t.”

“I already know plenty of things about you I shouldn’t.”

“You could’ve told me you were heading this way before I left,” Alaric says, “instead of standing in that yard telling me to go on ahead like you had someplace better to be.”

“I did have someplace better to be. Still do.”

“Same direction as mine.”

“Bad luck for both of us, then.”

He almost smiles, the real kind, the one that doesn’t do anything to sell itself. “You could’ve just said you wanted the company.”

“I wanted you gone a day ahead of me so I wouldn’t have to listen to you talk this much.”

I turn for the stairs before he can answer that, because if I stand here much longer I’m going to find out whether the sarcasm is the only thing keeping this from turning into something else, and I’m not ready to know the answer to that tonight.



The hallway is dark enough that I’m moving by memory more than sight when I make the trip back from the privy at the end of the hall, my braid still wet against my neck, my feet cold on the boards. I don’t expect to run into anyone. I definitely don’t expect to run into him.

Alaric is standing outside my door with no shirt on, one hand braced against the frame like he'd been about to knock and thought better of it. Water is still drying in the lamplight across his shoulders from whatever basin he'd found to wash in. Ink covers nearly all of him at this range, down both arms, across his chest, over his back where the lamplight catches the ridge of muscle beneath it, even into the webbing between his fingers. Old scars move through the ink in places, pale and silvered, the kind a body earns rather than asks for.

The red mark on his left forearm is worse than it was in the lane. It still doesn't look like ink. It looks like something spreading under the skin rather than drawn on top of it, thin branching lines like a vein network gone wrong, deeper red at the center and paler where it thins toward the edges, and where it crosses the black ink beneath it, the ink disappears, swallowed the way a fire swallows paper.

I lean in without meaning to. And there, half-hidden where the red threading is sparsest near his elbow, I see it for the first time. A single wing, small and angular, worked into the black ink like it had always been there and I had never gotten close enough to notice. Not decorative. Old, in the same way the script on his other arm was old. Half-covered now by whatever the red thing was doing to the ink around it.

He doesn't move to cover himself. Doesn't seem to occur to him that he should.

"Can't sleep?" I ask, because it's easier than saying anything about the fact that I'm staring, or the fact that he's letting me.

"Storms make me restless. Comes with the territory." He tips his head slightly, taking in the state of me, silk clinging in places it has no business clinging, made for a climate that isn't this one. His eyes drop lower, past the hem, down to the thin anklet I never take off and the beige polish chipping at the edge of one toe, like even that's worth his attention.

"You look like you're still sleeping in the desert, Rynn." Not Lady Rynn, not tonight, and something about hearing my name alone in that low, husky voice settles down into my bones, a shiver working its way up, goosebumps rising in its wake.

"I look like someone who rode through your storm for six hours."

"My storm?" Something flickers over his face, gone before I can call it guilt. "You planning to keep saying that like it's proven?"

"I don't need it proven. It needs to not happen again."

"Careful what you ask for." He pushes off the doorframe, closes half the distance between us and for one long second neither of us says anything at all. I can smell the storm on him even closer now, and under it, cedar and sandalwood. I'm aware, suddenly, of exactly how little I have on, and of the fact that I hadn't thought to care until just now. "You sent me ahead a full day so you wouldn't have to do this. Admit it."

"Do what?" I challenge him, refusing to move my eyes from his.

He leans down and whispers in my ear, "This." He gestures at the space between us, small, unhurried. Chills run up between my legs as his breath caresses my neck.

"You give yourself too much credit." I rush out, not sounding as confident as I was.

"Maybe," he says with a shrug and straightens his spine. “Or maybe you were hoping I would wait for you.”

I should walk away. I know exactly how to walk away, I've done it my whole life, made an art of it. But instead, I stand there breathing too hard for someone who has to bat men away like flies. But were those men? Because I’ve never seen a man like him before. Never had a man with a beard between my thighs before. I feel my nipples harden under my sheer gown and his eyes go directly there.

It's Alaric who steps back first, taking a deep breath in pushing his shoulders back.

"Go to bed, Rynn," he says, low and hard, not realizing how quiet we were speaking, it’s like a slap across the face. There is nothing charming left in it. "Long ride tomorrow." He turns to let me in my door and I go.

OceanofPDF.com



CHAPTER FOURTEEN

Alaric

I told the king what he wanted to hear. She is coming north. No blade needed, no cage, no fight. She walked into it herself, thinking she chose it.

I should feel nothing else. The plan worked itself out without me, cleaner than anything I built with my own hands. I don't have to earn her trust anymore. I don't have to sit across from her at some fire and ask about her past like I care, watching her mouth for the lie before it comes.

I can't stop thinking about her mouth.

Last night I tried to lose her in someone else, the way I've always done it. Close my eyes, let the body do what it does, get it over with. It never took anything from me before. Twenty minutes in a room in Korreth with a woman who didn't know my name and didn't want to, and I'd walk out lighter, the way you're lighter after bleeding out something you didn't need.

It didn't work like that last night.

I kept coming back to her mouth, parted just before I told her to go to bed. Replacing my hand with her mouth full of me. She wasn't performing for me at that moment, and that's the version I can't get out from under. Not the one that smiles at rooms full of people who see her as a delicate flower. The one underneath. The one with darkness trying to hide. The one that will bring you in gently and then ruin you.

I've met better liars than her. Men trained the way I was trained, taught to smile while they measure the distance to your throat. None of them do it like she does.

She laughs on cue. Tilts her head at the right moment. Opens her mouth into something warm, and every person in that room believes they're

looking at a woman with nothing to hide.

I know better because I've seen the other one. Low voice. Calculating eyes. No performance. The real her, when it's the twins or when it's me and she's stopped caring what I see. Something built to survive first and be liked second. That's the part I can't leave alone. Not the beauty. The precision of the lie, and the fact that I've watched the real thing underneath it enough times now to know the difference on sight.

I had an idea of her life before I met her. The Touched. Parents died when she was seven, both witches ran out of Drenoch before that. A younger sister drowned not long after, four years old. Another sister, Calla, three years younger than Rynn, a witch, living out past the sandstone two hours northwest. I know her face now. An older sister too, a year ahead of Rynn, gone from every record since the parents died. Rynn survived eleven years after that, on her own as far as any file shows, until a man put his hands on her sister and didn't walk away from it. Her power broke the ground under half the human ward that night.

That's the report I read before I ever set foot in Cadryn, gathered from the royal ward where I was posted. Names, dates, what she is.

None of it explains what came before eighteen. In the royal ward nobody had anything to give me. Not silence, not evasion, just a flat kind of nothing, the shrug of people who genuinely had no reason to know a human child's name. When I went down into the human ward myself and asked around, I got less than that. People went quiet when I got close, but it had nothing to do with protecting her. I'd thought, without my ears marking me Woken, I might pass close enough to humans to loosen a few tongues. I forgot about my eyes. No hiding the magic in those. They saw it and backed away before I could ask a second question. Coin didn't move anyone either. I couldn't even find someone willing to ask around on my behalf. Whatever they knew, if they knew anything, stayed with them.

I grab the rest of my things and walk down the hall to the front of the inn where both ladies are now, eating what seems to be oatmeal. Rynn doesn't lift her eyes from their table by the window. I take a seat near Nidmeh.

"Didn't sleep so well?" Nidmeh asks.

"I did sleep well actually." She scrunches her nose and tells me someone should tell my undereye that. The innkeeper brings out another bowl for me, and turns out it's not oatmeal.

"Grennit," he says, like the name should mean something to me. "My wife's specialty!" He leans in partially covering his mouth. "She works with what we have." He stands straight looking around, most likely for said wife.

"Thank you," I say with a slight nod. I look down into it. The color's wrong for oats, too even, too grey, and there's a sheen to it that grain never has. I stir it once. Whatever's under the surface isn't grain at all, boiled soft and mashed until it forgot what it used to be. Could be anything. Could be everything left over from whatever came through that kitchen this week.

I've eaten worse in worse places. I pick up the spoon.

Rynn watches me eat without comment, which is its own kind of comment. Nidmeh doesn't watch at all, too busy scraping her own bowl clean like she isn't sure when the next one's coming.

We get outside and the innkeeper's already hooked up our saddles and supplies. I can't help but walk a little slower, close enough to Rynn that I catch the scent of her, something warm underneath the cold morning air, and I let myself breathe it in once before we're on our own horses and it's gone.

She looks up at me as we walk. Neither of us says anything.

Her attention shifts past me, toward the treeline, where Nox is sitting still as stone at the forest's edge, watching. She shakes her head slightly and opens her mouth to say something, and I cut her off before she gets the chance.

"We travel together," I say to Nox, swinging up into my saddle, leaving no room for opinions on the matter.

He takes a hard step out of the trees toward us, close enough that the nearby branches shudder and the horses shift uneasily under us. He's speaking to Rynn, I know that much. But something about the feel of it lands in me too, not words exactly, more like the read you get off a man's stance before he's said a thing. I instinctively know what he is saying.

I answer before Rynn can repeat whatever he's said. "No one's asking."

He huffs out through his nose, a sound like a door slamming somewhere far off, but he doesn't press it further. Protective. Where she goes, he goes. That's going to be a problem for another day, once we're standing in front of the palace instead of a roadside inn.

The innkeeper's boy points us toward Fenrow Cross, half a day north, the last real waypoint before the land turns to forest for the rest of the way to Korreth. Cadryn's warmth doesn't survive the morning. By the time Fenrow

Cross comes into view, low roofs and smoke rising thin from a dozen chimneys, the air has the bite of somewhere that remembers snow.

We stop long enough to buy what the innkeeper couldn't sell us. Heavier cloaks, oiled and lined, the kind built for a north nobody in Cadryn knows what to do with. Nidmeh haggles over a pair of boots like her life depends on the difference of two coppers, and maybe it does. Rynn buys nothing for herself and everything for the twins. Small things, a carved comb, a length of ribbon, things she'll hand off the moment she's home.

I watch her do it and my stomach knots, knowing she isn't going home for a long time.

I still don't know what Maerek actually wants with her. I wouldn't dare ask him why. I tried the libraries in Korreth instead, public records, anything written about those born Touched, and found nothing before four hundred and fifty years back. Nothing before the six kings who rule the realm now. Just whispers older than that, and whispers don't hold up well in a library.

Davon told me the rest of it, once, years ago. An old Woken he'd crossed paths with on assignment, some nameless village at the edge of Korreth nobody bothers visiting. Osrik, I think he said the name was. Davon had been sent to collect the daughters of every surrounding village over fourteen, standard sweep, nothing unusual about it, except this Osrik cornered him afterward, wild-eyed, going on about things nobody in that village wanted to hear him say out loud, and Davon being Davon, stood there and let the man talk for an hour longer than he should have.

Eight hundred years old, Davon claimed, which the old man himself apparently insisted on, along with several other things he relayed with the specific gleam he gets when he's decided a story is more fun the crazier it sounds. Woken don't live that long. Five, six hundred if they're lucky and careful, not eight, and I told him as much. He didn't care. Said the old man had that look, the kind that comes from knowing something true and having nobody left alive who'd believe you, so you start telling it to strangers instead, dressed up bigger every time until someone, anyone, finally listens.

I laughed at him for believing it. I still laughed harder at the memory of him telling it, hands going everywhere, doing the old man's voice.

The ultimate one, Osrik told him, according to Davon, who admits himself the old man's eyes rolled halfway back in his skull saying it. The

chosen one. The Touched! The one who'll bring hell down on everyone who isn't worthy of standing near her.

I marked it under Davon's nonsense at the time. Every madman down on his luck has a prophecy he swears is real. Still, once I saw Rynn for myself, some very small, unreasonable part of me started wondering if the old man had actually been onto something, and I hated that part of me a little for it.

After getting all we need from the market past Fenrow Cross, including some adara paint that Rynn purchases for herself and Nidmeh, it seems like a real bonding moment for the women. The road narrows and the trees start closing in for good. Hallowdeep, the boy at the inn calls it, dropping his voice like the word costs him something to say out loud. I've heard the name before, secondhand, the kind of place that comes up in reports nobody wants to write in detail.

I don't say anything about that yet.

What I do instead, an hour before the light starts failing, is stop the horses at a wide bend in the road where the trees haven't fully closed overhead.

"We're stopping here for a minute," I say.

Rynn doesn't dismount. "Why?"

"Because I want to know what I'm working with." I get down, pull one of my knives, hold it out handle-first. "Before we're somewhere it matters."

Nidmeh looks between us like we've switched to a language she doesn't speak. "Working with for what?"

"For whatever's ahead of us." I don't say Hallowdeep. I don't say the reports. "Show me how you hold a blade. Both of you."

Rynn dismounts slow, deliberate, the kind of slow that isn't hesitation. She sways her hips as she walks to me and damn if she doesn't radiate in the sun. She takes the knife out of my hand without looking at it, flips it once, catches it low and reversed, and it's in her palm.

I don't say anything for a second. Then she flips it outward and grips it awkwardly. Without thought I am already holding her wrist. We both stare at our skin touching and she slowly lifts her eyes to mine. They are still brown but I see red undertones as if there is a glowing ruby trying to shine through the brown. Without looking away from her eyes, I slowly readjust her grip to the correct hold.

"Like this," I say, slowly removing my hand. Putting her other hand on her hip and lifting the knife as if she is holding a stick instead of a blade, she says, "Thank the stars we have such a strong capable man here to help

us." It sounds like a compliment with the sweet voice I have heard her use with the high Woken but with me, she doesn't use her mask. I see the full reality of what she really thinks about me helping her.

I saw her kill those men on the road a couple of weeks ago. I know she has skill but I didn't want it to seem obvious that I sat back and observed her while her body was singing through the air as if she was flowing through water.

If there are still some things I can teach, it will be hard to know what if she is not going to show her hand. I feel in my gut I shouldn't. But if I'm going to get her through the forest ahead in one piece then I need her to be capable of helping me keep her alive.

Nidmeh takes the second knife I offer with both hands, wrong grip, blade toward her own wrist. I correct it without thinking, my hand over hers for half a second before she pulls back like the contact burned.

"I've never held one of these," she says, quiet, like admitting it costs her.

"You have now." I don't make it a bigger thing than it needs to be. "We'll work on it. Every day, until you don't need me standing this close to fix your grip."

I see Rynn out of the corner of my eye, the knife still balanced easily in her hand. She flips it once, slow, testing the weight, then sheathes it in one motion and rolls her shoulder back like she's shaking something loose. It isn't relief. It isn't satisfaction either. Something in between, something she doesn't let all the way onto her face, and I can't read what's behind it, which is exactly the problem I've had since the day I met her.

We make camp in the last clearing before the trees fully take the road, dead wood stacked easy, the fire catching quick for once. Somewhere above us Nox is out hunting, never far enough that I don't catch the shift of his wings against the last of the light every so often. He doesn't land. He doesn't need to. I know exactly what he'd do if I gave him a reason.

Nidmeh gets a pot and supplies from the horses, deciding to go with the dried meat and root vegetables from Fenrow Cross, thin stew, more broth than substance, but hot, which matters more than taste out here. There are still several days of travel and Nidmeh clearly knows how to conserve food. We eat close to the fire, knees almost touching, nobody talking for a while, just the sound of Nidmeh blowing on her spoon and the wood popping.

"Tomorrow's colder?" Nidmeh questions, not to anyone specific.

"Tomorrow's colder," I confirm. A shiver runs up my spine and I try not to show the shiver. What's actually waiting past this clearing... I need to make sure we are prepared.

Rynn watches the fire more than either of us, her legs pulled up, arms wrapped loose around her knees. A rabbit comes out of the brush at the edge of the light at some point, close enough that Nidmeh startles and reaches for a rock, and it doesn't run. It sits there a moment, nose working, eyes on Rynn specifically, before it wanders off again like it had somewhere better to be all along.

Nidmeh laughs, disbelieving. Rynn doesn't react at all, like this is how the world behaves around her and always has been. I've noticed it before and tell myself I imagine it. I don't think I do. The low scrub near where she's sitting leans a few degrees more than the wind accounts for, leaves angled toward her the way a plant angles toward a window. I don't say anything about it. I don't know what I'd even ask.

"I've never seen a real bunny before," Nidmeh says, disbelieving. "In the human ward you will just find rattlesnakes and scorpions but nothing so cute as a bunny!"

"You should see their teeth, those are real cute," I say

"I may be from the desert but I'm not stupid. I know they don't really bite unless you try to capture it."

"Actually…" Rynn interjects, "that was not a little bunny you see in story books. That was a Kindly. They only come out at night."

Nidmeh's face does something complicated. "A kindly what?"

"That's the whole name. The Kindly." Rynn doesn't look up from the fire. "Nobody calls it what it actually is. Not out loud. Not even the people who study them for a living. You call it something nice and you hope it remembers you were polite."

"How do you know that?" I ask. I mean it as an easy question. It doesn't come out that way.

She's desert-born. Sand dunes and red rock and eight years in a royal ward, she knows the way most people know their own house in the dark, and nothing about this forest is that to her. There's no book on a shelf anywhere that would have taught a woman like her the name of something that lives in a forest she's never been before tonight.

She pauses at that. Just barely. Like she's checking the fact against herself before she hands it to us, the same way you'd check a blade was still sharp

before you used it, an instinct rather than a memory. "I don't know how I know it," she says, and there's something almost unsettled under how evenly she says it, gone as fast as it came. "I just do. Same way I know which way is north without looking at the stars, or when Nox is about to land before I hear his wings. It's just there. Already true before I go looking for it."

"What does that mean?" Nidmeh says, quieter now.

Rynn just shrugs and continues to stare at the fire not giving us more.

I let that sit. I've spent weeks now cataloging small things about her that don't add up to anything a court record could explain. The way scrub leans toward her, the way animals go still instead of fleeing, the horses calming around her, the way a rabbit tonight looks at her like it's deciding something instead of running. Whatever this is, it isn't training and it isn't inheritance.

She picks a piece of bark off her sleeve and flicks it into the flames, and for a second the ease drops out of her voice entirely. "They look like rabbits," she goes on, "because rabbits are the thing nobody watches. You don't check a hare for teeth. That's the whole design of it. It isn't pretending to be harmless. It's wearing the one shape that guarantees you'll stop paying attention."

Nidmeh has gone very still, her spoon forgotten halfway to her mouth. "So what does it actually do?"

"It watches first. Sometimes for days. Learn your habits. Where you sleep. Who stands watch and when they get tired. Whether anyone would notice if you went quiet for an hour." Rynn's voice hasn't changed at all, easy and even, and that's worse than if she'd dropped it low for effect. "Then one night it stops watching and starts walking straight at you instead of away. If you see one and it runs, you were never worth the trouble. If you see one and it stays..."

She stops there. Feeds a stick into the fire instead of finishing it.

"If it stays then what?" I push because Nidmeh looks like she'd rather chew glass than ask again.

"Then it already decided about you a while ago." Rynn looks up at me for the first time since she started. Firelight catches the amber in her eyes and holds there. "You just hadn't noticed yet."

The rabbit that wandered off into the brush ten minutes ago is nowhere in the treeline anymore. I check. I don't let her see me check.

Nidmeh pulls her knees up tighter against her chest. "That's a horrible story."

"It's not a story." Rynn goes back to the fire, unbothered, like she hasn't just planted something that's going to sit behind both our eyes half the night.



Rynn makes some sort of tea with herbs from her bag and gives it to Nidmeh telling her there is protection in it and if she drinks then there is nothing to fear while she sleeps. Nidmeh chugs it down quickly and visibly stops shaking. Looking at Rynn with hope in her eyes. "Rest now, you are safe," Rynn whispers as Nidmeh lies in her blankets close to the fire.

Rynn is walking toward me now with a large fleece blanket almost swallowing her tiny frame whole.

"Did that really have protection magic in it? All I smelled was mint," I ask as she gets closer to me, out of Nidmeh's ear shot. "I don't actually know protection magic but I do know how to get one to sleep calmly," she says and I immediately think about her being a mother and I am going to keep her from her children for only the old Gods know how long. Guilt starts to twist in my gut that I push out quickly blocking my thoughts the way I have learned through years of watching Davon in the fighting pits bleeding and half conscious. Most of the time I was able to take on his suffering when he pushed back but not when it came to the pits. There was nothing I could do to stop our required conditioning. I would go somewhere else entirely and that's what I do now. I focus on my goal. Remove this curse the King put in my blood for this specific task.

We take our things from our horses and start setting up our sleeping arrangements around the fire. I've already made it clear I'm taking the first watch, in which Nox has a lot to say about that, but ultimately he knows Rynn needs rest so my shift will be to keep watch of the dense trees ahead and a dragon who refuses to leave.

We will split the watch between the two of us, me first, her second, Nidmeh sleeping through both because neither of us trusts her reflexes yet if something comes out of the dark. Nidmeh beds down closest to the fire.

Rynn takes the far side of the clearing without being asked, putting distance between herself and both of us that I understand better than I want to.

"You did that on purpose," I say as she gets settled in her makeshift bed. "Earlier. With the knife."

"Did what?"

"Let me correct your grip. You wanted to see what I'd do." I watch her face for the flinch that would tell me I'm wrong. It doesn't come. "I've seen you kill three men on a ridge without breaking a sweat. You didn't need my hand on your wrist to teach you how to hold a blade right side up."

She goes still for exactly one beat too long before she answers, which tells me everything her mouth is about to say, will be a lie.

"What do you mean?" She blinks up at me, all wide-eyed innocence, tucking the blanket higher like she's cold instead of caught. "I don't know what you're talking about." A small, helpless laugh, the kind she hands out at Solennes to men who bore her. "I'm just a simple girl, Alaric. Touched, sure, but I've spent eight years being handed everything I could ever want on a silk pillow. A king who dresses me. Servants who cook for me. What would I know about holding a knife properly?" She flutters a hand vaguely at her own chest, at the picture of herself she's decided to sell me tonight. "I'm spoiled rotten. Ask anyone in Cadryn."

"I'm asking you."

"And I'm telling you." Her voice stays light, sugar-sweet, the exact register she used on the innkeeper two nights ago right before she lied to his face without blinking. "Some women are built for the battlefield. I am built for very expensive jewelry and being told how lovely I look."

"You slit a man's wrist tendon before he finished reaching for your shoulder."

"Did I?" She settles deeper into the blanket, eyes already drifting half shut, the picture of a woman ready for sleep and nothing else. "I really don't remember it that way."

I let the silence sit there instead of pushing. I've learned that much about her by now: she doesn't crack under pressure. She just gets better at the mask the harder you press on it. Pull back, and sometimes something honest slips out sideways when she thinks you've stopped looking.

Once Nidmeh's breathing has gone slow and even, she turns back with her blanket still on under her chin. "You've been through here before, right?" Rynn says.

"Once. On my way south, before Cadryn." I keep my eyes on the treeline instead of her.

"What did you find?" Can she feel it? Do the trees talk to her?

"I only saw one. Not a pack, not a horde, just one, which is the only reason I'm here to tell you about it."

I feel her watching me now, really watching, and I let myself say the rest of it. "Ghouls, or rather Ghasts. Ghast is a type of Ghoul, they paralyze. Came up out of the ground almost under my feet before I heard it, fast in a way nothing that gaunt should be, all teeth and no patience for the chase."

"You outran it?"

"I climbed. They're diggers, not climbers. They spend their whole lives carving through rock and dirt, and whatever that does to a body, it doesn't leave much built for going up. I sat in that tree most of the night while it clawed at the trunk, and by morning it had given up and gone back to ground."

"Back to ground."

Rynn says flatly with her eyebrow lifting. Slowly and deliberately she angles her head down. The exact angle she uses on Henrix when he's told her something he clearly believes and she clearly doesn't. She looks at me from under her long lashes as if waiting for me to say just kidding but instead I stay still and say calmly, "Seriously."

"They don't like the sun. I'm not sure why, they just don't come up in it. It's the main reason people don't typically travel through Hallowdeep but rather around the Greyspine mountains, but it adds another week to our travels."

"A tree is how you escaped?" She now has uncrossed her arms, asking more seriously but still apprehension in her voice.

"They don't climb well. Too long in the limbs, wrong kind of hungry. I sat up there most of the night while it circled underneath, and when the wind shifted enough to carry my scent right down to it, I turned the wind instead."

"You can do that."

"Badly, and only for a few minutes at a time. Enough to push my own smell sideways long enough for it to lose the thread and wander off looking somewhere else." I look at her finally.

She's quiet for a moment, the fire popping between us. "And now you're taking two women who've never fought through the same forest?"

So she is still going to pretend she can't kill three men in a matter of moments. Got it.

"Now I'm taking two women who've never fought through the same forest," I agree but making it apparent I am not as stupid as she wants me to be. "Which is why we're stopping early tomorrow, and why you're both going to do exactly what I say. Plus, you were already headed in this direction without any help from me. Good thing we ran into each other." I give her a grand smile letting my charm shine through. Charm or a look of constipation I can't be sure.

She doesn't argue that. She just rolls her eyes and looks away, and something about the specific way she does it, unimpressed, unbothered, like I'm a mildly amusing problem instead of a threat, sits under my skin somewhere I don't have a name for yet. She lays back down and puts her back to me. And gods help me, I just want to devour her. I don't know what's gotten into me, or maybe I ate something funky at the inn, but my dick gets hard every time I see her caught off guard. I stand to walk away and readjust myself before taking up my post.

Nox's eyes follow me and huffs a large amount of hot steam from his nostrils at me. Little is he aware that he just thaws my freezing ears.

He doesn't sleep. I don't think he sleeps, ever, or if he does he's found a way to do it with both eyes technically open, because every time I glance his direction one of them is already on me. Not on the treeline. Not on what's out there in Hallowdeep worth losing sleep over. On me.

I've been standing three feet from this fire for the better part of an hour and he still hasn't decided I'm not going to kill someone.

Every book I ever got my hands on growing up said the same thing about dragons, back when there was still the occasional book that bothered mentioning them at all. They had all gone south. Far away, to a long-lost place over five hundred years ago. Scholars never seemed to agree on why they left but they all seemed to agree that if you meet a dragon and you are fae (these books were before the Woken established themselves as *Woken* and were just considered the fae) walk the other direction. I am not fae, at least not all fae because I clearly have round ears and stronger magic than any Woken I have met.

I don't need his trust but it's also the single most inconvenient thing I've encountered in the last several weeks of careful, patient, extremely well-executed work.

I have killed men who trusted me faster than this thing has warmed up to my presence.

I shift my weight. He tracks it. I reach down and adjust the strap on my pack, purely for something to do with my hands, and I feel the weight of his attention settle harder on the motion like I've reached for a blade instead of a buckle.

"I'm allowed to move," I say, quiet enough not to wake either of the women.

He doesn't dignify that with a response I can hear, which is somehow worse than if he'd said something.

The necklace sits at the bottom of my pack where it's sat for three days now, wrapped in a scrap of cloth so it doesn't catch light at the wrong moment. Simple thing. Plain silver, small enough to disappear under a collar, and according to the one source I trust on the subject, the only known method for quietly severing a Touched from her dragon without either of them feeling it happen until it's already done.

Walking her into a castle with a dragon three hundred years old and immovably protective standing outside the gates is not a plan. It's an invitation for every guard in Korreth to die badly.

I glance at him again. He's still watching me with that same maddening stillness, mass settled into the dark like he grew there.

If he'd just trust me enough to fly off and hunt for an hour, this would all be considerably easier.

OceanofPDF.com



CHAPTER FIFTEEN

Rynn

The sky is losing its stars by the time I wake, black softening toward the grey that comes an hour or two before true dawn, and Alaric is still standing exactly where he was when I closed my eyes. He should have woken me hours ago. Should be asleep himself by now, catching what he can before first light. Instead the fire's down to embers and he's still on his feet, which means whatever sleep he gets before we move again will be two hours, if that.

Alaric is watching me as I get up to relieve myself. I walk to the other side of Nox so his bulk blocks the view. When I come back around, Alaric's back is to me. I walk up behind him and gently place my hand on his forearm.

"Sleep," I whisper to him, low enough not to wake Nidmeh. His eyes meet mine and he doesn't move. We are locked in this moment a beat too long, and it's as if he's checking for a door I forgot to close. We don't say anything. With the moon disappearing and the animals of the night going back to their homes, nothing moves but us. Even the wind's gone still.

"I've got it from here," I say, determined to move a step back from him. He doesn’t speak. Just lifts his hand slowly and places a rebellious hair behind my ear. His hand near my cheek is so warm in this freezing temperature and it takes everything not to lean into his hand.

He moves to his bedroll as I take up my post of guard duty near Nox. I look over at his form, slow, steady breaths already lifting his blanket. Inside a minute, he is asleep, total sleep that only comes to people who've trained their bodies to take rest wherever it's offered.

I settle against Nox's foreleg instead of the cold ground, his scales warm even at this hour, banked heat that never fully leaves him. He doesn't sleep. He never does, not really, but his eyes have gone half-lidded and easy now that Alaric is finally down and still.

You let his watch run long, Nox says. Not an accusation. Just an observation. *You could have woken earlier.*

I know.

Why didn't you?

I think about it honestly, for once, instead of brushing past it. Because some small, unguarded part of me liked knowing someone else was awake in the dark instead of just me. I don't say that out loud but instead say,

What's ahead of us that you know and haven't said.

Ghouls avoid open ground. Whatever's in there, if it's what the stories say, it won't be a single den. Things like that don't stay small once they've had generations to dig. A pause, something careful in it. *I can't see through that canopy well enough to know what we're walking into. I don't like sending you in somewhere I can't watch.*

You're not sending me anywhere. I'm walking in on my own feet.

I know. Something in it, low and old, that sounds almost like an apology for worrying at all. *Doesn't make it easier.*

We stay like that until the grey overhead goes pale, two hours passed. Alaric wakes on his own, no one needing to shake him. Already reaching for his boots before his eyes are fully open.

Nidmeh stirs not long after, folding her blanket into a square too neat for someone who slept as badly as she did. She flinches when a branch cracks somewhere off in the trees, then catches herself flinching and pretends she was only stretching.

I need to wake something in my body before I let myself think too hard about why. The unease hasn't left since we stopped here for the night, and my body wants to move it out rather than sit with it. I start simple, feet planted, working through the same drills I've run a hundred mornings on my own land, back when the only thing watching me train was red rock and cactus.

Nidmeh is somewhere behind me. I hear her move, and then she's on her feet too, matching my stance a beat behind, clumsy at first, correcting when I correct.

"You don't have to," I tell her, not stopping.

"I know." She doesn't stop either.

We work through it together until we're both sweating despite the cold, until the tightness in my shoulders has somewhere to go besides my spine. Alaric watches for the first quarter hour without joining, arms crossed. He steps in behind Nidmeh, adjusts her grip on the knife she's pulled from her belt, shows her the angle her wrist wants instead of the one she's giving it.

"Like this." His hand over hers, brief, professional. She doesn't flinch back and allows him to help her. "You're not trying to stab through a door. You're trying to end something fast."

Nidmeh's eyes catch on the dagger at my own hip while he says it. Black as a starless sky with a strange smoke-grey sheen, a single burnt-orange jewel glowing at the base of the blade like an ember that never quite dies, small diamonds set in a wave along the hilt.

"Where'd you get yours? It doesn't look like anything I've seen at market."

I don't answer right away. My hand goes to the hilt without deciding to, an old habit, and for a moment I wait for the grief to com, sharp and immediate every time someone asks. It doesn't come. Hasn't, not fully, not since the shaman. What's left instead is something quieter, harder to name. Not loss. Recognition, maybe, of a kindness that was given to me once by someone who isn't here to be thanked for it anymore.

"A gift," I say. "A long time ago."

She doesn't push. I'm grateful for that more than I let show.

By the time we're both worked loose and breathing hard, the sky has gone from soft dark to something closer to true morning. We pack up the horses and head out.

The trees close in fully within the first hour. The sky is swallowed by canopy thick enough to dim the morning to something closer to dusk and a shiver goes up my spine. I wish I could've ridden Nox last night. Felt the stars on my skin and the wind in my hair. That won't be happening for a while now, not with watch duty splitting our nights in two. Hallowdeep earns its name honestly. The light here doesn't fall so much as leak, filtered green through leaves grown so dense overhead that I lose track of where the sun sits within the first mile.

Nox can't fit through it. He said as much before we left camp, low and unhappy about it, pacing the tree line like something caged.

I'll fly the ridge above. I won't be far. He says. Not far isn't the same as here. This is the first time in eight years we are separated by force. When he leaves to hunt, sure but this? I can't tell if it's my anxiety or his with the tension in our bond as if we are both holding onto a road connecting us with all our might.

Alaric rides point without being asked. Nobody argues him on it.

"You're quiet," he says, an hour in, dropping his horse back level with mine once the path widens enough to allow it.

"I'm always quiet," I say with a half smile which takes significant effort considering my wariness of not having my support animal with me.

I am not a support animal and you will not ever refer to me as such. Nox huffs, indignant, and it pulls a chuckle out of me.

"Not like this." He doesn't look at me when he says it, eyes tracking the tree line. "This is a different quiet."

He's not wrong, and I hate that he's not wrong, hate more that he notices. I've felt it since we woke up. Not just about my forced distance from Nox but a hum under my skin that isn't quite the mark. I am high on alert the same way I always felt going between alleys and knew there was a human man closing in on me. Watching me.

"Something's watching," I say, because there's no version of lying to him that would hold for more than a mile anyway.

"I know." He says it plainly, no surprise in it at all, which now scares the shit out of me. I've walked into plenty of danger before and known exactly what I was walking into. This place, I don't. That's the part that scares me, not the thing in the trees, but not knowing its shape. I’m not familiar with this type of wilderness. "Has been since we crossed the tree line."

"You knew and you didn't say anything?"

"I knew there was a chance. Didn't know for certain until just now." He says it plainly, no defensiveness in it. "Telling you 'maybe' before we had a reason to believe it would've just given you something to sit with for a night you didn't need to lose sleep over."

He's not wrong, and it needles at me anyway, mostly because I did the same thing to Nidmeh from the other direction — gave her the true version of the Kindly story last night instead of a softer one, because I'd rather she walk in with her eyes open than comfortable. Different instincts, same shape underneath. Neither of us tells anyone more than we've decided they can carry.

"Tell me now," I say.

He does, and it's worse in the forest than it would've been by firelight last night. Ghouls don't den in Hallowdeep by accident. They dig, generation over generation, tunnels that outlast whatever built them first, catacombs stretching wider than any single map has ever charted because no one who goes deep enough to chart them comes back to draw the lines. They avoid the sun on instinct, not command, which means daylight buys us hours, not safety.

"How many hours."

"Depends how hungry they are." He says it like a fact, not a threat, which somehow makes it land harder. "We're not stopping to find out."

Nidmeh has gone pale a horse-length behind us, close enough to hear every word. I don't apologize for that. Better pale and prepared than smiling and surprised.

I keep rolling my shoulders back as we ride, working out a tightness that has nothing to do with the training and everything to do with whatever's waiting ahead of us.

"You're doing that thing again," Nidmeh says to Alaric, a few horse-lengths back, apparently deciding the silence has gone on long enough. "The face you make when you're pretending you're not worried."

"I don't have a face."

"You have several. That one's the worst."

"Careful. I taught you to hold a knife an hour ago. I can just as easily un-teach you."

"You can't un-teach someone a knife, Alaric."

"Watch me."

The first sign comes just past midday. I can’t pin down the chill that runs up my spine, only the wrongness that precedes one, the way silence precedes a struck match. Birdsong stops mid-note somewhere off to our left and does not resume. The horses feel it before we do, ears pinned, one of them sidestepping hard enough that Nidmeh grabs the pommel with both hands to stay seated.

"Rynn." Alaric's voice has dropped into something flatter, all the warmth gone out of it at once.

"I feel it."

Something's there, I feel our bond stretch with the distance now between us. I can't see through this canopy. I don't like not seeing him.

"I don't hear the cicadas," Nidmeh says, in a hushed whisper.

We don't stop moving. Alaric angles us wider around whatever silence is sitting in that patch of trees rather than through it, and for a hundred yards nothing happens at all, which is somehow the longest hundred yards I've traveled.

Then I see it. Low, pale, crouched between two roots in a shape that wants very badly to look like nothing at all. Not moving. Watching. It’s a Ghoul.

I don't point. Pointing would tell it I've seen it, and some part of me, old and animal and older than the mark on my spine, understands that the watching only matters until the watched one notices back.

I hold Alaric's eyes instead, and something passes between us that doesn't need words, and he angles his horse a half-step closer to mine without slowing his pace, close enough that his knee brushes my leg through both our layers of travel-worn cloth.

"Don't look at it," he says, barely above a breath.

"I wasn't going to."

"Liar." I know he is trying to make light of a very bad situation but this does not feel like a time to joke.

“If it attacks, we will be fine. You will be fine.” The humor has left his voice and his stern deep voice catches me off guard. “I’ve got you. I know you are capable but I will not let you get hurt.” He looks at me and raises his eyebrows to ensure I understand his words. I turn to face forward with a mask of serene aloofness as if I am walking through the gardens at Calla’s. But I feel the spark running up my spine and through my shoulders with the same low vibration that's been sitting under my skin since the attack on the royal ward in Cadryn, waiting. Nervous, anxious, cornered, it doesn't seem to matter which. It's stirred twice now since we left home, quiet and small compared to what it can do, but enough that I've started noticing the moment right before it wakes instead of only the moment after.

I force myself to breathe and we continue.

The thing in the roots doesn't move as we pass. Doesn't follow. I feel its attention on the back of my neck the whole hundred yards anyway, patient in a way that has nothing to do with hunger and everything to do with decision, and I think of the story I told over the fire without meaning it as a warning to myself.

If you see one and it stays, it already decided about you a while ago.

I don't tell Alaric that part. I think he already knows exactly which one of us it was watching.

We put another mile behind the thing in the roots before either of us breathes easy again. The sparks under my skin have subsided. Alaric’s shoulders drop an inch, and something almost like humor comes back into his face.

"You didn't even flinch," he says. "Nidmeh's hands are still shaking and you are acting like that thing owes you money."

"It didn't move. Neither did I. Seemed fair."

"That's not fair, that's terrifying." He shakes his head, half a laugh in it now that the danger's a mile behind us instead of a horse-length. "You know most people, when something that wants to eat them is sizing them up from the treeline, they get a little pale. A little quiet. You just got quieter than usual, which for you is somehow worse."

"I don't have time to be afraid of everything in a forest that might startle me. I'd never get anything done."

"Startle you?" Something shifts in how he's looking at me, amused now in a way that reaches all the way up into his eyes. "That thing was sizing up whether to eat one of us and you call that a startle."

"Fear's a luxury. I never had the spare time for it."

"Everyone has spare time for fear. It's free. Doesn't cost you a thing to be a little afraid."

"It cost me plenty, the years I tried it. It’s not for me." I say it lighter than it deserves, and he doesn't push on it, which I appreciate more than I'd admit out loud.

"You're a walking disaster wearing a very calm face, you know that? A whole forest could fall down around you and you'd just stand there deciding whether it's worth your attention."

"I'll take that as a compliment."

"Take it however you want, Ruin."

The name takes me by surprise. I don't ask him to explain it. I'm not sure I want him to, not when asking might make him think too hard about why he said it and take it back.

Nobody has ever called me anything but my name. Not once, not in eighteen years on the streets and not in the eight since. Rynn is what my mother named me and what everyone since has used, plain and unadorned, a word that does nothing but point at where I am. This is different. I don't

know yet if it's an insult dressed up as affection or the reverse, and I find, uncomfortably, that I don't much care which.

I like it. I like that he saw something in me worth naming, even if the name means I break things.

"Ruin," I repeat, testing the name in my own mouth.

"Fits, doesn't it." He's not looking at me when he says it, eyes back on the tree line, all business again, like he didn't just hand me something I'm going to turn over in my chest for the rest of the day.

OceanofPDF.com

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

Rynn

We don't run into anything else before we make camp, which should feel like relief and doesn't. Alaric picks the clearing with the same attention he picked last night. Sightlines checked, escape routes counted before either of us has climbed down from our horses. Nidmeh helps with the fire without being asked now, quick hands, no hesitation. She still flinches when Alaric reaches past her for the kindling, but less than she did three days ago.

"Tonight," Nidmeh says, once the fire's caught and the horses are settled, "you teach me something real."

"I've been teaching you something real," I say with a dull edge to my voice.

"Knife work isn't what I mean, and you know it." She sits cross-legged across from me, chin up, something stubborn in the set of her jaw that reminds me, briefly and sharply, of Calla at that age. "I'm a witch. You're the only one who'd know how to teach me anything about that, and I need to know."

"I don't have training," I tell her. "What I know, I know from watching my mother when I was seven. That's not a lesson. That's a handful of scraps."

"Scraps are more than I have."

Alaric says nothing, sharpening a blade he doesn't need sharpened.

I look at her a long moment. Sixteen and unregistered and marked in ways that have nothing to do with anything physical on her skin, the kind of

mark that gets built into a person from the outside in rather than chosen. I know that shape. I wore it myself once.

"Small," I say finally. "We start small, and if it goes wrong, it goes wrong at nothing worse than a scared rabbit." Her whole face changes when she smiles. It doesn't happen often enough and something twists in my heart.

We start with the ash from the fire, a pinch of it in her palm, and I have her think of the shape she wants instead of the outcome she wants, because that's the one true thing I remember watching my mother do, over and over, hands steady over a bowl of something I was too young to understand. I never learned what she mixed in. Just the stillness. Just shape, not outcome. Want the door, not the room behind it.

"Pick something small," I tell her. "Something that moves the way you already know it moves. Don't make me choose it for you. It has to be yours or it won't hold."

She thinks about it longer than she needs to, mouth pressed tight in concentration, and finally says, "A frog."

"Then think about a frog. Not the word. The weight of it in your hand. The way the back legs coil before it jumps."

It takes her four tries. The first three, nothing. The fourth, the ash lifts, shapeless, and scatters before it finds any shape at all. She makes a frustrated sound low in her throat.

"I keep thinking about wanting it to work," she says.

“So stop it. I told you what to think of. Do it.”

"How do I not think about that?" she says with an undertone of frustration.

"You don't stop thinking it. You just stop needing it." It's not a good answer. I know it isn't the moment it leaves my mouth, but I don't have a better one, because nobody ever gave me one either.

Alaric looks up from the blade. "Pick one thing about the frog," he says, interrupting us from potentially calling this quits before we barely started. "One. The legs coiling, like she said. Just that. Let the rest of it go blurry." He says with a calm and patience I have not heard from him before.

Nidmeh looks between us, then nods once and closes her eyes again.

On the fifth try, the ash lifts clean off her palm, holds a shape for the length of one held breath, back legs cocked exactly the way she pictured, and then collapses. Not scattering this time. Falling straight down, all of it,

puffing ash everywhere. Into her lap, up into her hair and across the bridge of her nose in a fine grey ash.

Nidmeh goes very still. Then sneezes, hard, and a fresh puff of it clouds off her own face.

Alaric starts choking on his water.

"It's not funny," Nidmeh says, ash still settling in her eyelashes.

"It's a little funny," he says.

She swipes at her face with the back of her hand, which does nothing but smear it, and glares at both of us with pure fury. We'll need a river tomorrow, I think, watching her try and fail to get it out of her hair. There isn't a version of this where she sleeps clean tonight.

"You made a frog," I tell her, trying to help lift her spirits. "Nobody said it had to land gracefully."

"I wanted it to jump."

"It will. Not tonight." I nod at the fire, at what's left of the ash pile. "Try once more. You need to make sure to monitor your magic so you don't drain it. I have a feeling you are far from it but you have been living amongst humans most of your life not using your power so I don't want you to burn out too quickly. One last try before we eat. Make it count."

She scrubs her palms clean on her thighs, takes a slow breath the way I showed her, and closes her hand around a fresh pinch. This time she doesn't rush it. I watch her shoulders drop, watch whatever's tight in her jaw ease a degree, and when the ash lifts this time it holds the shape whole, legs and all, and jumps once, clean, off her palm and into the dirt before it falls apart mid-air.

Nidmeh doesn't make a sound at all. She just stares at the space where it was, mouth open.

"That's it," I tell her, and mean it, and something in my own chest goes tight and unfamiliar watching her face do that. Wonder. Plain, uncomplicated wonder, the kind I don't remember ever getting to have about my own power, not once, not even the first night.

"Do it again," Alaric says, not looking up from his blade, and there's something curious buried under the flatness of it.

She does it three more times, each one holding a beat longer than the last, before her hands start shaking from something other than fear.

"Enough," I tell her. "Save something for tomorrow. Your body will show signs of the drain, and this is one of them." I know that sign the way I know

my own hands. My mother, elbow-deep in a basket of bread and dried fruit, pressing healing magic into every piece she could reach for a neighbor who'd never once done the same for her. My father in the doorway, voice low, telling her to stop, that these people weren't our friends, that she didn't owe them her own strength. She never stopped. Not once. Kind to a fault, when the world gave her enough room to be.

She sits back, ash-streaked and grinning despite herself, and for a moment none of us says anything. Alaric is still watching the space where the ash-frog jumped, his arms folded, eyebrows drawn, lost in thought.

"It’s not real," I tell him. “No matter how hard you look at it, it's not going to spring back up.”

"I've never had to think this small," he says. Not defensive. Just honest, which is rarer from him. "Mine's never been about wanting a shape. It's just there and it comes when it's called." He turns the blade over once, not sharpening now, just holding it. "Didn't know there was a version of it that had to be built one frog at a time."

He looks at me when he says it with a slight smile.

Is he opening up right now? I don't know what to do with that. This isn’t typical flirtatious banter. He is really saying something true. Males who do this are usually working an angle. Some old wound trotted out like a gift, *my father was cruel, my mother left,* as if the telling itself earns them something from me. Then the hand at the small of your back a minute later, like the two are owed to each other. Pathetic little transactions dressed up as intimacy... Some women like that softness in a man. I've always felt like they just need to get the fuck over it.

Alaric isn't doing that and Alaric isn’t a Woken male. I can see he isn't even looking for something in return for his admission. He's talking to the frog, or to himself, working something out that has nothing to do with getting me alone later. He is staring at me and I see the softness in his eyes not looking for anything in return.

I roll my eyes and walk toward Nox for the weapons he's been carrying since Calla's.

I train after Nidmeh's asleep, because my body doesn't know how to stop the way hers does, wound too tight from three days of watching treelines. Alaric joins without asking, and we run through forms until sweat replaces the cold clinging to both of us.

"Your stance is wrong," he says. "You're bracing like you expect to be knocked down."

"I've never been knocked down. Not unless it was already my intent."

"Not by me." He steps in behind me, close, closer than the correction requires, hand at my hip turning it a fraction. "You brace like that, you're already halfway to the ground before anyone's touched you."

My breath catches at the warmth of his hand seeping through my leathers. He smells like sweat over something warmer underneath, cedar and sandalwood, the same scent that clings to him after every hard ride. My knees go weak. Could be the training. Could be something else entirely.

His hand is large enough that his fingers wrap clear around my hip, close enough to the crease where it meets my thigh that one breath more of pressure would send it straight to my center.

"Never stopped me from getting my target before," I say, failing to put any real strength behind it.

He leans down, mouth close to my ear. "Then you've never fought anyone as skilled as me." The words send a shiver straight up my spine.

He uses the grip on my hip for leverage, squeezes once, just long enough to make my heart pound, and spins me to face him before letting go.

I turn my back to him instead and move through the next form, refusing to give him what he wants. I've been training since I was a child, though not his kind, not the warrior's discipline he could actually teach me something in. My body answering him doesn't mean I trust him. It never has.

He has stopped training, just watches me and verbally corrects my next move. I look over my shoulder, eyes narrowed on him. Why does this man insist on getting so close...

"Ruin," he says with a low undertone as if it’s painful to hold himself back.

I straighten slowly and turn to face him fully. Something about the way he says it this time, low and personal instead of light and teasing, and I feel it in his voice move down to my core. I don't answer. We stand there, staring at one another, his eyes blue as a gathering storm, ringed gold at the

center, fixed on me the way something fixes on prey it already knows it's caught. I won't give in. I'm stronger than this.

He's a stranger. Suspicious blood, unexplained loyalties, always showing up exactly when I need someone to. Every instinct I've spent a lifetime sharpening tells me not to trust a man I can't fully place.

But I've spent every day since Gael died being the one who decides. What we eat. Where we run. Who to trust and who not to and how fast we move when the answer's wrong. Nobody else carries that weight for me. Nobody else ever has, not since two children became mine to keep breathing no matter the cost to myself.

For one moment, staring into a storm I don't understand, some tired, starved part of me wants exactly what my instincts are screaming against. Wants to be taken instead of asked. Wants someone else to decide, just this once, so I don't have to be the one weighing whether it's wise.

Then the clouds shift, swallowing the moon, and the choice stops mattering at all. I can still see him. Barely. Enough that this isn't blindness so much as permission, the dark drawing a curtain around the two of us until the rest of the world, the kingdom's fake smiles, the suspicions, the version of me that never stops calculating, disappears behind it. No past. No future. Just a man and a woman and the oldest need there is, the kind that doesn't ask what anything means.

All thought leaves my head as he breaks first, walking toward me fast and deliberate, forcing me back a step until the bark presses into my spine. One hand braces against the tree beside my head. The other finds my waist instead of my hip this time, bare skin where the wrap of my top doesn't quite meet my leather pants. I let him hold me there. Blocked in.

His hand at my waist is calloused, rough with real work, no soft palm that's spent a life giving orders instead of doing anything with his own hands. I've never been touched by hands like his, thick with old scars I can feel more than see in this dark. He's big enough that the tree at my back barely registers past the sheer size of him blocking out what's left of the sky. When his eyes drop, slow, down the length of me, I feel invisible hands, moving over every inch like they're taking inventory of something they intend to keep. Shivers go straight through me, low, to the center of everything.

"You've been doing that thing all night," he says, low. "Watching me like you're deciding whether I'm a threat."

"You are a threat."

"Not to you." His mouth is close enough now that I can feel the words more than hear them. "Never to you."

I don't move. Neither does he, several heartbeats pass, both of us caught in whatever this is. The fire down to embers behind him, his shadow over me, all consuming. Nidmeh asleep twenty feet away and Nox a mile off in the dark, close enough to feel and too far to see.

Then he kisses me, and it isn't gentle, and I don't want it to be.

His hand slides from my waist up to my jaw, tilting my head with his thumb while his fingers wrap around the back of my head to the angle he wants, and I let him have that too, some old instinct loosening up in me too tired tonight to fight for control of something I don't actually want to control. He tastes like woodsmoke, and underneath it, faint, the mint tea from dinner still clinging to his mouth. It shouldn't undo me the way it does, but being so close to him, it's a craving I didn't know I was depriving myself of. His tongue mixes with mine in a strong fluid motion as if he is savoring my taste.

He releases his hold on my mouth but doesn’t stop. His beard scrapes rough against my skin when he drags his mouth along my jaw, down my neck. My shirt is being held up with fabric tied together around my neck, limiting his access. That won’t do. I reach up, tug the knot loose at my neck, and my top gives, held now only by the wrap of fabric beneath my breasts. He steps back without releasing me fully, and stops breathing for a moment. The heat in his eyes causes me to shift, attempting to alleviate the ache between my legs. In an instant he is back at my neck but this time with full access and I feel my own breath go ragged, dropping my head back, looking up at the night sky.

"Alaric." I don't get further than his name. I don’t even know what more to say. I don’t want this to stop. This spot on my neck his mouth is devouring, has my eyes rolling back, every thought dissolving before I can hold onto it. He slides one hand down the side of my breast, cupping it, thumb dragging over my nipple, while the other slides lower, around my backside to cup my ass.

"Let me." Not a question. His hands are already at my hips, working the laces of my pants loose before I fully register the intent behind it, tugging them down over my hips and letting them pool at my ankles. I step out of them without being asked. I understand what he's asking only as he sinks

down in front of me slow and deliberate. Eyes on mine the whole way, like he wants to watch what this does to my face before he's even started. My back finds the tree fully, bark rough on my exposed skin.

His hands push my legs apart and reach through to grip the back of my thighs, scooping me up, pulling me forward off the tree and forcing my legs up over his shoulders all in one motion. Then he stands. I want to protest, going from the cover of his body to my breasts fully exposed to the night, but before I can, his beard is the first thing I feel... as he slides his nose along my molten silk inhaling. Rough against my soft skin, a drag of sensation that has nothing gentle in it at all. It should be too much. It's exactly enough.

“I’ve been dying to taste you.”

His lips replace his breath, and when his tongue finds me, parting me slow before he settles into something less patient, I feel the roughness of him everywhere at once, jaw and stubble and the give of his mouth all working together, no part of him soft except the one part doing the most damage.

I bite down hard on the sound that wants to come out of me. He notices anyway, some low satisfied sound coming from his own throat that I feel more than hear, vibrating up through me like it belongs to my own body instead of his.

His beard scrapes against my inner thigh every time he shifts, a rhythm of rough and slick and relentless that I have no defense built for, eight years of training doing nothing to prepare me for this kind of losing control.

He is sucking my clit once then licking up my slit then sucking again. I am about to scream with frustration at the constant change, and he starts laughing. “Ugh, you're killing me,” I say, and I deflate for a second trying to catch my breath. “Oh, I don't think so. We are just getting to the good part.” He winks at me and his mouth is straight on my clit, not letting go. My hands find his soft hair and grip there, not guiding, just needing something to hold onto now that there's no ground left to find at all.

Between his sucking and the sensation of his beard, I am desperate to push harder into him. I grip harder as he slides two fingers in at once and my eyes burst open, mouth agape. I can’t get a breath as my eyes flutter closed. Pumping his fingers in and out while continuing to work my clit, his hand comes up to my hard nipple and pinches. Hard. Sparks, off every nerve in my body, go off in the most delicious way.

He doesn't stop until I'm shaking, until his name is the only word left in me. Only then does he ease my legs down from his shoulders, my body sliding along the front of his as my feet find the ground again, unsteady, everything in me still humming. When he finally straightens, dragging the back of his hand across his mouth, there's nothing soft in his eyes at all, only heat, banked and barely held.

He didn't bend to work around the height between us. Alaric doesn't fit himself to what's in front of him. He moves it until it fits him instead.

I can feel exactly how hard he is, pressed against me where he's got me caught between his body and the bark.

I can’t stop myself from sliding my hand over his impressive size. Anticipation killing me to feel him in my hands. I slide my hand once over his pants and he grips my arm.

"We're not doing more than that tonight," he says, rough, and pained like he is trying to convince himself.

"Why not?"

"Because when I finally get to feel what it's like to actually be inside you, Ruin, I want you rested enough to remember every second of it."

I don't have an answer for that. I am frustrated he is stopping this. This incredible moment. To have someone worship me that way and still leave my body craving more.

We stand there another minute, both of us breathing like we've run somewhere instead of stood still. I am feeling a mixture of frustration, and a calm I haven't felt in years.

He kneels without a word, retrieves my pants from where they’d pooled at my feet, and holds them open for me to step back into, one hand steadying my hip while I do. He laces them himself, unhurried, like there’s nowhere else either of us needs to be, fingers working the ties with more patience than anything else about tonight has shown. I study his face as he stays focused on the laces. Lines in his face that show his life was not easy. Painful even. I want to reach up and trace them. This simple act of putting my clothes on for me undoes me, reminds me of the love my parents had for me. How alone I have been since.

I go to turn away as emotions flood me but he takes my hand and pulls me into him. He kisses my cheek, soft, right over a tear I didn't realize had fallen. “Sleep sound tonight, Ruin, we have a big journey tomorrow.” His voice low in my ear.

We turn together and make our way back to the dying fire and the sleeping camp and the long dark stretch of forest still ahead of us in the morning.

He is taking first watch and I have found the warmth of my blankets near Nidmeh still sleeping heavily. He isn't Woken. I've known that since the first week, matching the round shell of his ear against every Solenne I've ever stood through and finding nothing that fit. Every Woken I've seen either calls a strong wind or sets a man's boots on fire from ten feet away, wears the point at the top of the ear like a brand that comes with the blood. Alaric doesn't carry it. Witches don't carry the point either, but witches don't call specific magics either, and they don't kiss like the weather itself just claimed you. Whatever witches do is built, herbs and old words and years of learning exactly where to press. His isn't built. It's just there, the way mine used to be before it broke loose. Except he is a storm, I can smell it, and Nox can sense it under his skin.

I still don't know what he is. My body seems to have decided it doesn't care.



The sun's high enough now that the horses have settled into an easy, plodding rhythm. Nidmeh nudges her horse level with mine before I've even finished my water. "Show me the last part again," she says, no hedging in it at all, no waiting for me to notice she wants something. "The stone glowed and then it just stopped. I want to know why it stops."

She didn't used to ask like that. The girl I found in that alley would rather have gone without than say out loud what she wanted. Now she just asks, plain as day, and doesn't flinch waiting on the answer. Something in me warms at it every time, more than it probably should.

I explain she needs to focus and use her magic to create a light surrounding the rock not coming out of it. She practices a bit more and moves on to the first Mimicry magic we worked on at the last camp. She's got ash from the morning's fire, pinched between two fingers within the hour, working the same failed shape over and over as we ride. She's gotten

good at doing it one-handed, reins loose in the other, the horse patient enough not to care.

Alaric rides a length ahead, half-turned in his saddle to watch, and flicks a thread of wind back at her without warning, just enough to scatter what little shape she'd managed.

She comes up sputtering, ash on her lips. "That was you!" She hollers pointing at Alaric.

"Me?" Looking around innocently, putting his hands up in surrender.

"You did that on purpose," Nidmeh scolded.

"Ok, you got me," he says, entirely unbothered, "but it was funny. You were just so focused I couldn’t help it." Alaric smiles broadly, clearly proud of himself.

She narrows her eyes at him, and I recognize the look. Her jaw right before a knife lands exactly where she intends it to. With Alaric’s back now facing Nidmeh, she says a small chant and balls a hand into a fist and pulls her arm back quick. A small tug, invisible, and Alaric's head jerks sideways like someone's grabbed a fistful of his hair, hard enough that his horse sidesteps under him.

"Ow." He rights himself, rubbing at his scalp, more offended than hurt. "That was my head, May. What if you'd caught it on fire? And took my beard clean off with it? There would be riots in the street."

Nidmeh brightens at the name. "I have excellent aim," she says, head held high. "And maybe I was aiming for the beard," Nidmeh says, entirely deadpan, and goes back to her ash like she hasn't just threatened a man's face from horseback.

I'm laughing before I mean to, low in my chest, watching him fuss at his own jaw like she's actually singed something. "You say that like the beard's the tragedy in that scenario."

"The beard," he says, with the wounded dignity of a man who has clearly given this beard real thought, "is load-bearing for the rest of my face. Without it I'm just teeth and a bad attitude."

"That tracks," I say.

Nidmeh doesn't even look up. "She's not wrong."

"Nobody asked you."

"You're outnumbered," I tell him. "Two women, one opinion."

"One of you isn't even trying to make a frog anymore."

"I'm resting," Nidmeh says, with great dignity, ash still dusting one eyebrow.

Alaric looks between the two of us, shakes his head like a man who knows exactly when he's lost, and mutters something about ungrateful company under his breath that doesn't have any real heat in it. Nidmeh catches my eye across the space between the horses, the corner of her mouth twitching, and for a moment it's easy, the three of us here, road dust and sun and nothing worse than teasing in the air.

Then Alaric looks at me, and whatever's under the joke shifts, low and warm and no longer about the beard at all. "Careful," he says, pitched just for me even with her riding right beside us. "You wouldn't have yelled my name so loud last night if I didn't have this beard."

"I didn't yell." There's no real effort behind it. I might have. I honestly don't know, and that's somehow worse than knowing.

I heard you from a mile out. You yelled.

I go still in the saddle. "Traitor," I mutter, before I can stop myself.

"Who's a traitor?" Nidmeh asks, glancing between the two of us.

"Nobody," I say, at the same moment Alaric says, "Nox," with the smug satisfaction of a man who's just won something without lifting a finger.

Nidmeh looks between us, then up at the sky like she might catch sight of him. "Wait, he can hear us? From all the way up there?"

"Apparently everyone heard it but you," I mutter, and refuse to say another word for the rest of the ride, no matter how hard either of them tries to bait me into it.

I press two fingers to my sternum without deciding to. It wasn't there before the night the twins grabbed each other's hands inside that hut and something came up out of both of them at once, something that burned anyone who wasn't them. I felt it happen, not one child in danger and one child safe, but both of them, twinned, the same pulse folded over itself. It's stayed since, low behind my ribs. No words. Just a pulse, steady as anything, telling me they're alive and warm tonight, wherever tonight finds them.

Getting back to them is still the whole plan. It always has been. I just didn't expect the road there to feel like this.

OceanofPDF.com



CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

Alaric

I've had the last watch for an hour, the fire down to embers, and for the last few minutes I haven't been watching the treeline at all. I've been watching her instead. She sleeps the way she does everything else, like it's a decision rather than a need, spine straight even unconscious, one hand near enough to the blade at her hip that she could have it drawn before her eyes are fully open.

Last night is still sitting in my chest, heavier than it has any right to be. Her mouth. The sound she made against that tree, the one she tried to swallow and couldn't quite manage. I've had women before. None of them left me lying awake afterward cataloguing the exact grip of someone's hand in my hair like it was worth memorizing.

I think about the frog too, before that. The way she went somewhere else behind her own eyes the second I told her the truth, that I'd never had to build anything one piece at a time before her. I meant it as nothing. Just a fact, laid down because it was true and she was there to hear it. She rolled her eyes and walked off to get her knives like I'd said something worth mocking instead of something worth responding to.

I've turned it over enough times now to know it wasn't mockery. It was retreat. I've watched men do the same thing on a battlefield, the ones who'd rather take a blade in the ribs than let someone see the fear get there first. She does it with her whole face instead of a sword arm, but it's the same maneuver. Smile bright and warm enough that nobody looks past it. I don't know yet what's underneath hers. I know there's something, and I know she's spent a long time making sure nobody gets close enough to find it.

That's what did it last night, if I'm honest with myself, which I only let myself be for the one hour of the day nobody's watching. Not just wanting her. Wanting to feel that same defiance up close, the one she threw at me mid-form, chin up, telling me nothing had ever knocked her down that she hadn't chosen. I needed to know what that sounded like from an inch away instead of across a clearing. Needed her attitude on my own mouth instead of just in my ears.

I've never met anyone who carries themselves like her. Not court-trained composure, not the practiced stillness they beat into recruits at the Hold. Hers is older than training. She watches a room the way a soldier watches a treeline, cataloguing exits before she's finished a sentence, and she does it while smiling wide enough that half the fools around her think she doesn't have a thought in the world. But I can see. She is calculating. She has barriers. She's a survivor first and everything else after, and she plays dumb about her own sharpness so well that most people never notice they're being managed.

I noticed by the second week and that's impressive considering I am the King's High Shadow.



Six days out from Fernrow's Cross now, and the road stopped feeling like a road somewhere around day four. The trees close in tighter here, older, blocking out most of the light even at midday, and the cold's turned real the last two days, frost thick enough each morning that the horses pick their footing carefully through the iced ground.

Rynn didn't own a single thing built for cold. Desert-born, desert-raised, and Nidmeh's borrowed clothes from Calla were cut from the same climate, thin, open at the back for heat that doesn't exist this far north. I told her what she'd need before we ever reached the crossing, fur-lined leather, boots that wouldn't let snowmelt through by evening, something heavier than the wraps she's worn her whole life. Rynn bought for both of them without a word of complaint, though I watched her count coin twice before handing it over, weighing what mattered enough to spend it on even though the King of Cadryn pays her more than anyone in the Kingdom.

The male who sold us the gear warned Rynn and Nidmeh plainly, the kind of warning you give people who've never seen real winter. Snow year-round past this point. I could have told them the same but a warning lands harder coming from a stranger than from someone they still don't fully trust.

Rynn chose a jacket with white fur lining in white leather which I know was a tactic on her end for blending into the snow. Even when she is not in danger, she still uses caution. I admire her focus but then again, the forest we are walking through is full of dangers that she is preparing for.

Nidmeh wanted to get a leather jacket that had fur dyed to red. She said it made her green eyes shine but Rynn wouldn’t hear any of it and got the same white jacket she'd chosen for herself. She’s been grateful but that first hour she fought like hell to convince Rynn they would be just as safe with red, and if Rynn was spending so much, shouldn't she at least get the color she actually wanted.Rynn just continued on not saying a word to her until she finally stopped her begging and said quietly. “Thank you Rynn, really. This is the softest thing I’ve felt let alone worn.”

The jackets Rynn purchased were cut close enough to the body that they won't slow down a blade arm, and she got them boots lined thick against the cold that's already here. It was a struggle lugging all of it around back at the crossing, neither of them fully grasping yet what the north actually asks of a person. They're grateful for every piece of it now, this close to the snow.

Close enough to midday that my stomach's started saying so. I lean down without slowing, work my pack free from where it's lashed behind the saddle, and loop the strap across my chest so it rides against my back instead of bouncing loose. Dried meat, some of the hard bread from the crossing, not much of either left if I'm honest with myself about how far we still have to go but the food bags on the other horses should last. I eat one-handed, reins loose in the other, the same way Nidmeh's been working her ash the last few days.

Rynn passes what's left of her water skin to May without being asked, and only then takes a short sip of it for herself. Neither of them drinks carefully and that tells me it's gone. I've seen Rynn ration everything before. May too. This is likely the last of it before we find a stream, or a well, or something better than snowmelt to fill it back up with.

Rynn goes still in her saddle. The same stillness from the carriage, right before the attack came. Her head tilts a fraction, like she's listening to

something under the ground instead of in the air. She doesn't say a word. She doesn't have to.

"The birds stopped," Nidmeh says, quietly, a beat after Rynn goes still. She's not wrong. I hadn't noticed until she said it, but the crows that have followed the treeline for two straight days, the ones that always trail wherever there's death or the promise of it, have gone dead silent, all at once, like someone reached out and shut them off.

Rynn's hand curls slightly at her side, like she's trying to hold something that's already gone. "I feel them leaving." Her voice goes soft and distant, like she doesn't believe what she's saying. "All of them. Every living thing in this stretch of woods, pulling away from us at once." Her eyes track something I can't see, following a retreat I have no way of sensing. "Animals don't run from me. They never have." A beat. "They're running from what's coming."

The wind shifts too, I feel the wrongness in my blood, and shivers run up my spine. I've never had a name for what I do with storms beyond calling it storm magic, but something in me reads wind the way Rynn seemed to intuitively know that rabbit, *Kindly*, wasn't going to harm us. This wind shift isn't natural. It's being pulled, not blowing.

Then the smell hits. Rot first, and something wetter underneath it, stagnant water gone thick, and under both of those, dry earth turned over. Ghasts smell like whatever they've been eating and the ground they dug through to reach it. Decomposing corpses. I've smelled it once before, outside a cemetery wall in Korreth's outer district, and I never forgot it. But this is a hundred times stronger than the cemetery. Rotting flesh.

Nidmeh pulls her scarf around her face and ties it, then continues working a pile of ash in her palm, eyeing the road ahead. I catch myself watching Rynn check the treeline every few minutes without seeming to, the same unconscious sweep she's done since the moment I met her.

"Nox," Rynn says, mostly to herself, one hand lifting slightly like she's steadying something only she can feel. A beat passes before she speaks again, this time loud enough for the rest of us. "There's a town a day's ride from here. Small trading town, maybe half a day if we push the horses." Her eyes don't leave the treeline even as she says it. "Says the road looks clear ahead. Doesn't feel clear, though."

I turn and say, "Ashwick… I've passed through there before. We can—"

The first one comes out of the brush crouched low, spine bowed forward, knuckles nearly brushing frozen ground. Grey-green skin pulled too tight over muscle that shouldn't fit a frame this gaunt. Hairless skull. Eyes gone entirely white, no pupil, nothing behind them that reads as thought. Its jaw hangs unnaturally long, packed with teeth built for tearing rather than chewing, and the claws tipping each finger are black and thick, made for digging through packed earth and stone alike. The Ghast. “Don’t let them touch you,” I make sure my voice is low but loud enough for them to hear, “...their claws, even just one scratch will paralyze you.”

It isn't alone. Four more break from the treeline behind it, then a fifth further back, all moving in that same wrong, crouched scramble, like the whole pack decided to hunt at once instead of picking us off one at a time.

"I know that town." I try to say more, but the words die before they clear my throat, the first one already closing the last few yards between us at a dead sprint, much faster than I've seen before.

Rynn already has a blade in each hand before I've fully drawn mine, and a third appears from somewhere at the back of her belt a half second later. I've watched her dress, watched her ride, watched her sleep in that same leather like taking it off would cost her something she's not willing to pay, and I still can't account for the number of blades she keeps hidden on her body. I make a note to ask her, and then forget the note exists the moment the second Ghast clears the treeline.

Wind answers me instantly, gathering tight around my forearms and snapping out in a controlled burst that catches the nearest one mid-leap and slams it sideways into a tree hard enough to crack bark. Not dead. Stunned, which is enough. I jump off my horse and close the distance and put my blade through its throat before it finds its feet again. Rynn is down off her horse running to the nearest Ghast when Nox bellows from above but he can’t get through the canopy. I know he is searching for a break in the tops.

"Would've been useful," I say, ducking one that goes for my throat and driving my elbow into the side of its skull instead, "to still have my own blades..." I slice another upward, slowing it. "The ones Nox made me leave in Cadryn because apparently a storm and two fists weren't humble enough for him."

"Complain later," Rynn says, not even looking at me, burying a knife to the hilt in the thing closing on her left.

Nidmeh's horse bolts the second the pack breaks cover, and she goes down hard in the dirt, scrambling backward on her hands. I don't have time to reach her. I only have time to watch her shove both hands into the frozen ground, pulling something rough and half-formed out of the dirt. A wolf, or the suggestion of one, growling, hackles raised, facing down the Ghast closing on her. It's enough to make that one flinch toward the sound of it instead of toward her, for one full second.

I use that second to close half the ground between us at a dead run. It isn't enough. A second Ghast comes at her from the blind side, the one her wolf never turned to face, and I'm still three strides too far to reach either of them in time.

Something answers Nidmeh's scream before I do. Not me. Rynn.

The ground under the three nearest Ghasts buckles inward all at once, frost and packed earth heaving up like something exhaled from below, and all three go down hard, one of them folding wrong at the middle and smashing flat on the hard ground. I've seen her fight twice before this, the ridge, and Cadryn. I've never seen this.

Every Woken I've ever faced calls one thing, wind or fire or ice, whatever their blood gave them, and nothing more. My own storm's always run bigger than that, stronger than anything I've seen out of the others they trained me alongside, though I've never had a reason to ask why. Even so, it's mine. It starts inside my chest and ends at the edge of my own skin. This isn't that. This is raw, shapeless, far too big for the space it needed to fill, like something reached down out of the sky itself instead of up out of a single body.

The mark along her spine catches color under her collar, gold bleeding into red before I can process I'm looking at it, and for one heartbeat the air around her tastes like the second before lightning finds ground.

She doesn't look pleased with herself. She looks furious, and underneath the fury, something closer to scared.

It buys us the opening, but not fast enough. Nidmeh's scream cuts through both of us at once.

She's down before I can reach her, one of them attempting to catch her forearm from behind and a single raking claw cuts into her skin before Rynn’s dagger slices into its skull from the other side. Not a deep wound. Barely a wound at all, from where I'm standing. But her whole arm seizes

rigid the second the blood wells up, and her legs go out from under her like the strings holding her upright have been cut clean through.

"She's paralyzed," Rynn says, already moving, voice cold, hands not quite steady when she reaches for her. "Not dead. Paralyzed."

"That's not better if something gets to her while she can't move," I say, and I don't wait for agreement. I have her over my shoulder before the words are fully out of my mouth, her weight nothing at all against the adrenaline running through me, her arm hanging stiff and wrong against my back.

We scan the area with the ten dead Ghasts around. Rynn takes charge before I get a chance to make out what our next move will be, “Nox is here, one minute and we will all get on him whether he likes it or not.” I turn my head to her stunned but before I find words, she continues, “I know. It’s fine. He’s smelled them for miles.” We both turn quickly to the thick forest ahead. There must be fifty more Ghasts headed our way. The smell is causing my eyes to water.

The closer two break for us together on the left, and Rynn meets them both without breaking stride, one blade opening a throat, the other driven up under a ribcage angled wrong for a human body but exactly where something's heart should sit regardless. She doesn't flinch putting either of them down. I've stopped expecting her to.

I’m still standing in the same place Nidmeh dropped, assessing where Nox will land with so many Ghasts so close. There is no room. They will be on us in seconds with this enhanced speed. “THERE!” Rynn points to a hole near her, large enough for a horse to be lowered down. “Into the ground now!” She must be crazy but for some reason I can't argue. Even though every warrior's instinct I have is screaming that going underground blind, with more of these things potentially waiting below, is the worst possible move available to us. But there is nowhere for us to run. They have us surrounded.

"There could be more of them down there," I say anyway, because someone has to. “They're going to jump in after us. We will be sitting ducks.”

Rynn's hand presses flat to the dirt for one full second, eyes gone somewhere distant. "There isn't. Everything's up here. All of it, hungry, all of it above ground." She doesn't explain how she knows. I don't ask.

Whatever she just did, I felt something in the ground answer her, the way I've started feeling storms answer me before I've called them.

“Nox will burn the ground, taking all these things down. NOW JUMP!” With the Ghasts nearly on us, I jump down, Nidmeh on my shoulder, holding her tight and Rynn follows right over our heads. One second later, Nox's fire turns the world hot and gold above us, catching the Ghasts mid-jump into the hole coming after us. We move off to the side pushing ourselves against the cold, dirt-packed walls and a few breaths later the tunnels are dark. We look up at what used to be a hole, and see it’s sealed shut, black and glistening, the Ghasts not burning to ash but melting instead into thick goo and locking the only light out and keeping us in.



We've been walking these tunnels in near darkness, but Rynn has been working on creating light. I've never witnessed something like this before. Typically you manipulate firelight or sun-rays, but not create light from nothing. It started as a glow emanating from her hands, expanding upward, then flaring out. She huffs out a breath.

"It's okay. Give yourself time. It takes a lot of practice to learn one's magic, and you just used a lot of it above ground." I explain.

"I feel it. Just under my skin. I can feel that making light is possible, and I need to check on Nidmeh. She should be up by now. I thought the paralysis lasted less than an hour. Why isn't she moving yet?"

Nidmeh is still slung over my other shoulder, weight limp and unmoving. I reach out with my free hand and grip Rynn's shoulder. I don't know the right words. Rynn's body tenses, then relaxes. "You'll get your light to hold. Nidmeh is with us and Nox is right above us. We're all okay." She turns to me and leans her head onto my chest, careful of Nidmeh's dangling arm between us. I wrap my free arm around her and we stand like this for a moment, just breathing. Rynn is shaking just slightly. Nidmeh's breath is the only sound underneath ours, shallow and even against my back.

"Being down here is bringing up some old memories." She wipes at her eyes.

"I'm here to listen."

She takes a deep breath and leans further into me. "One of the homes I was in, after my sister… I was about ten. The short man. That's what I remember him by. Shorty used to put me in the kitchen, under the stovetop, in the cabinets. He'd keep me there for days while the pipes underneath got so hot from his cooking. If I didn't come out with a burn, he'd heat a fork and run it down my body. Said I deserved several marks for not learning my lesson the first time. I never knew what the lesson was supposed to be.

"My sister Calla was there too. Whenever he turned toward her instead, I'd do something. Shove him. Throw the food on the floor. Scream about nothing, just to pull it back onto me. It worked, mostly." She says it the way someone describes a chore they used to do, not a wound.

She lets the silence sit for a second, and when she speaks again there's something harder underneath it. "I had an older sister too. Sylla. She stayed about a year after our parents died. Then she left. Just left, Calla and me both, and never once looked back." Her jaw tightens. "I never thought that was something a person could do. I thought we were stuck together, the three of us, no matter what came. It never crossed my mind that leaving was even a door that opened. Then she walked through it like we weren't worth the weight of staying." A short, humorless breath. "She didn't feel anything for us. Not enough to matter, anyway. Only ever looked out for herself."

"I think it's the dark, being down here. I've never spoken of this with anyone before, but here, where I can feel you but not see you clearly, it's like I can speak more freely." She starts shaking her head, pulling away, and I know she wants to take it back.

She is so strong and capable, always having it together. This version of her is new. She has never given anyone this before, I can feel it in the way her whole body waits to see what I'll do with it. I want nothing more than to hold what she's just handed me and never once make her regret it.

I grab her arm before she pulls too far away and rub lightly with my thumb, "I'm glad you told me. It stays with me and goes no further. And Shorty needs a poker in the eye." I laugh. "I'm happy to volunteer."

"Nox already offered. But I wanted that life gone. Just move on and leave them all in the dirt. He didn't deserve my attention."

"You say that like it still lives in you." I watch her in what little light there is.

Her voice drops as she says, "It doesn't. Not the way you'd think. I don't feel it when I say it out loud, haven't in years. It's just a thing that happened

to a girl who isn't me anymore." She rolls her shoulder, checking a wound long since closed. "It's the dark that does it. Not the memory. I could tell you that story in full sunlight and feel nothing. Down here, no sky, no stars, nothing above me, that's what drags it back up. Not what it is. Where I am."

I don't understand it, not fully, but I nod like I do. "Then let's get you back under the sky."

"Working on it." Light, but her hand finds the wall like she needs to know something solid still exists.

“Nox hates that I'm down here worse than I do. He knows my past. He's angry.”

"You're not alone this time. That's the difference. I won't let anything happen to you." I squeeze her tight, Nidmeh's weight shifting against my other side. I'm such a prick. I'm kidnapping her. This woman I thought would be simple, would like parties and pretty things, but she's been through it, survived, and now I'm the one bringing her to Korreth in chains. But I don't want to die. What choice do I have?

Rynn steps back and stands still. I can barely see her, but her breathing has changed. Shorter now. Her hand hasn't left the wall.

"Ruin?"

"I'm fine. Just need Nidmeh up. We should check the satchels while we're waiting, see what we're working with." Her voice is even but the words come too fast, one running into the next.

I shift Nidmeh down off my shoulder, laying her out along the ground between us, and we feel around our bags. Two apples, some dried meat. Enough for one. Barely any water. Nidmeh didn't have her bag on her when we went under.

Nidmeh's breathing goes wrong.

Rynn is glowing from within now, no longer coaxing light into her palm but becoming the light herself. Not just under her skin. The marking across her collarbone, shoulders, and spine shines through, casting tiny stars onto the tunnel walls. Not just stars. Entire constellations. Ones I don't recognize from any sky above us. I suck in a breath. Rynn and I look around in wonder, both struck still, as Nidmeh starts to shake.

I drop down beside her, and Rynn kneels on her other side. In the light pouring off her, we finally see why Nidmeh is still paralyzed. What started as nothing, a slight scratch, now shows the skin around it spreading dark, faster than any scratch that shallow has any right to spread, veins of black

threading up from her forearm toward her shoulder like ink dropped in water.

I crouch down and take her wrist, turning it toward what light Rynn is giving off. I've seen Ghast paralysis before, in small villages I've been assigned to around Korreth, seen what a scratch that shallow should look like. This isn't that. The skin around the black veins has gone the color of a bruise three days old. I press two fingers below the wound, checking for heat, for the kind of fever that means a body is fighting something. She's cold instead. Cold and getting colder.

Then I look at my hand, at the black under my own nails from where I dragged the last one off her before Nox's fire took it, oily and wrong in a way no blood I've ever spilled has been. Ghoul blood runs red-brown and thin. This isn't that. This is something with weight to it, something that clings.

"Talk to me," Rynn says, and there's an edge in it I haven't heard from her before.

"It's not paralysis anymore. Not just that." I keep my voice level because someone in this hole needs to be. "This is something else. Moving too fast to be an infection setting in on its own."

Rynn's hands hover over Nidmeh's arm, not touching, like she doesn't trust herself not to make it worse. Under her breath she’s saying, "Not again. Not again, I won't lose another—" She cuts herself off, jaw tight, and for a second the woman who told me about Shorty like she was reciting a grocery list is gone. This is something underneath that.

She goes still. Listening to something I can't hear.

"Nox is telling me it's in me." Her voice comes out strange, distant.

"What is?"

"I don't know. He just keeps saying it. That I know what to do. That it's in me." She presses her palms flat against the dirt on either side of Nidmeh like she's bracing against something. "I don't know what he means. I don't know what he means and she's dying and I don't *know*."

I watch something in Rynn's face go from controlled to nothing at all, the mask dropping so completely and so fast that for one second I see exactly what's underneath it, and it isn't the smiles and sunshine everyone assumes lives there.

It's a woman about to lose someone who means something.

"Nidmeh." Her voice cracks on the second syllable. Nidmeh's eyes are open, unfocused, her breath coming shallow and too fast, lips turning blue. Rynn's hands land on her before I can say anything, flat against her chest, and the tears that come are silent.

"Not her too," she says, so quiet I almost miss it, and I don't know what that means, not exactly, but I understand the shape of it well enough. Someone else was lost this same way once. Someone she couldn't reach in time. “You will not take her.” Rynn whispers.

Then the ground moves.

Not an earthquake. Nothing so large. Just the dirt beneath Nidmeh's arm splitting open in thin, deliberate lines, and roots pushing up through the tunnel floor, pale and searching, the kind that could only belong to trees old enough and massive enough to still be reaching this deep after centuries of growing downward. They wrap around Nidmeh's forearm like something with a conscience.

I have my blade half-drawn before I understand what I'm looking at.

"Don't," Rynn says, not moving, not looking away from Nidmeh's face. "It's me. It's not hurting her."

I look to Rynn’s hands, watching them shake against Nidmeh's sternum, watching the same silver mark I've seen along her spine a hundred times now catch a color I've never seen it hold before, something between root and rust, low and quiet instead of the sharp blues and whites I've witnessed before. This isn't a weapon. I don't know what it is. I only know it's hers, and I know enough by now to trust that when Rynn says something isn't hurting the people she loves, it's true.

The black recedes first from Nidmeh's fingertips, then her wrist, drawn backward along the same path it came, pulled down into the roots and the dirt and whatever Rynn is doing that I don't have a name for. Nidmeh's breath catches, hitches, and then evens out. Her eyes focus for the first time in hours, find Rynn's face, and hold there.

"Hey," Nidmeh says, thin and confused and alive.

Rynn doesn't answer with words. She just pulls her into her arms, dirt-streaked and shaking, and I watch two people I would have called strangers a month ago hold onto each other like the alternative was never survivable to either of them.

I sit back on my heels and let myself breathe for the first time since the treeline. Relief comes in first, then something rawer underneath it,

adrenaline with nowhere left to go. I watch Rynn hold her like there was never any other option, like losing her wasn't a thing she could survive, and something in my chest goes tight that has nothing to do with the ghouls or the dark or any of it. I don't let myself follow that thought any further than the ache it leaves behind.

They release the hug, and Nidmeh looks up at me. "Hey, May. We've got you."

She smiles and sits up on her own.

"We're not safe yet," I say, once her breathing has settled into something closer to sleep than shock. "We still need to find our way out."

"I know," Rynn says. She doesn't look up from Nidmeh's face right away.

When she finally does, I'm close enough that neither of us moves to fix the distance. My hand finds the small of her back before I've decided to put it there, and she lets it stay, which tells me more than anything she could have said out loud.

"You're allowed to fall apart sometimes too," I say, low, meant for her alone in a tunnel where sound carries further than either of us would like. "Not just for her. For yourself."

I don’t push her to speak and she stays quiet, watching her. In the dark, with Nidmeh's breathing evening out and the whole forest sealed shut above us, the only thing I can do is let her know she is not alone.

OceanofPDF.com



CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

Rynn

The tunnel widens the further we walk. Not dug the way a man digs, straight lines and right angles, but bowed outward in places, worn smooth by something with real weight and a lot of years rubbing against stone. Claw marks score the walls at uneven heights, some low near the floor, some high enough that whatever made them stood on legs longer than any of ours.

I run two fingers along one set of grooves. Five points, evenly spaced, deep enough to lay a full knuckle inside without touching the bottom.

"They didn't just hide down here," I say. "They built this."

The light within me is strong and constant allowing us to see several feet around us. I drift towards a side passage we haven't taken. Bones line the edge of it, gone the color of the dirt around them, stacked in a way that looks almost deliberate. A wall built from what's left when the Ghasts finish eating.

We pass another opening a few dozen paces on, wide enough for three of us abreast, then another not long after that, narrower, angled sharply downward into dark I can't see the bottom of. Then a fourth. A fifth. Each one different in width and grade, none of them looking freshly made, all of them old enough that the walls have gone smooth the same way the main tunnel has.

"This is too many," Alaric says, counting the last branch the same as I am. "Too many, going too many different directions, all of it well-worn."

"Generations of it," I say. "This isn't a den. It's a city." I nod toward the branching mouths behind us, ahead of us, more of them than I've bothered to count. "And a city this size doesn't sit under one town. Whatever built

this has been feeding off half the realm for longer than anyone's known. How is it possible that this is not more well known?"

“I can’t be sure whose territory this part of the forest belongs to but it is strange considering all of the towns and villages surrounding Korreth. We are only two days out from the castle.” Alaric says.

Nidmeh's color has come back, though she still tests each step before trusting her weight to it. She stops in front of the bone wall and doesn't flinch the way I expect. "How long does something like this take to build?”

"Longer than either of you have been alive." Alaric says with awe and fear surrounding his voice.

I look at him. "How would a merchant know that?"

Something flickers behind his eyes, and he pauses. "You hear things. Trading routes cross paths with people who've seen worse than furs and better than either of us." He doesn't quite meet my eyes when he says it. "Enough trips through enough dark places, you pick up the shape of what's old and what isn't."

It's not the truth but it's also not a lie. I notice that we are walking much closer to each other than the past several days. He is a mystery, skilled and experienced. But I can’t take him at his word. Hell it's not like I am the most forthcoming either but I shared some deeply personal things with this man. I need to remember what I am, and who I'm not willing to lose because I got comfortable in the dark. I subtly walk a bit closer to Nidmeh. If he notices he doesn’t show it. I know the difference between a merchant and a fighter, the way I know the difference between a blade drawn to threaten and one drawn to kill. I let it go for now.

Further in, the tunnel opens into something wider still, a chamber with a ceiling too high for my light to fully reach. Old fire scorch marks blacken one wall, layered over each other, dozens deep. Ghasts have no need for fire. They don't cook what they take, don't wait long enough to need heat for anything, the hunger doesn't allow for patience, only immediate ruin. Whoever lit these fires wasn't a Ghast. It was someone who came down here thinking they could survive the night.

They were wrong. Small bones scatter near the base of the scorch marks, too small to belong to anything that could have fought back. I don't point it out. Some things don't need saying out loud for everyone to understand them.

Alaric has gone very still beside me, staring at the same wall. "Missing children," he says, quiet, mostly to himself. "The villages outside Korreth have been reporting them for years now. More of them, every season. Nobody in the castle looked twice at it. Outlying villages, no coin behind the complaints, no reason for the King to spend men chasing rumors."

"You knew this."

"I forgot it. It wasn't worth remembering, before today." His jaw tightens. "This many tunnels, this much of them, feeding for this long… that's not natural growth. Something's been letting this happen. Or making it happen. Can’t Nox just claw his way through the ground?"

"He has tried. There is something preventing him from penetrating the ground we are under with claw or fire. In fact all the tunneled areas seem to have some sort of protection over them from above.” No one says anything for a few minutes processing what that could mean.

“How does something even become one of them?" I change subjects. "A Ghast. What are they? They don’t feel of this realm."

"People, once," Nidmeh answers. "That's what they whisper about in the ward, anyway. That if you do wicked things while you're alive, it opens something in you. A door where there shouldn't be one. And when you finally die, a demon walks in through that door before your soul's had the chance to leave, and traps it there with itself. Wears the corpse like a coat. That's what rises."

Nobody says anything for a moment.

"Whispers," I say, mostly to remind myself as much as her. "Not fact."

"No," Nidmeh agrees and we all continue to walk in silence which makes my mind focus only on what Nidmeh said.

We stop to eat what's left, which isn't much. Nidmeh reaches for her satchel out of habit before her hand remembers it isn't there. I hand her half of what I have instead, an apple and a strip of dried meat.

"That's all of it?"

"Long as it lasts." I look at what's left in my own hand and don't let myself think too hard about the math of three people and two apples. "We'll find water before food becomes the real problem." I don't know how I know it, only that something under my palm, faint, I feel the ground here isn't as dry as it looks and if I focus I should be able to bring that water to me. Considering how I blew up the well at Calla’s place, I don't want to risk this tunnel filling with water so for now I’ll keep it to myself.

Nidmeh is eating slower than either of us, portioning it out in her head, trying to make small amounts feel larger than they are. I know that trick. I taught myself the same one a long time ago, back when hunger was a permanent guest. The cold down here isn't like the cold above ground. Above, it moved through you and kept moving, wind carrying it off somewhere else. Down here it settles, collecting, and without anywhere to move, the walls are iced as well as the ground. My fingers have gone stiff enough that drawing a blade quickly would cost me half a second I don't want to owe anyone. I flex them attempting to get the blood moving.

We finish eating and continue to walk for what feels like an hour or so based on the ache in my legs. We come up to three directions we could turn. All similar in width but the two side tunnels are lower in height by about 12 inches. "Ashwick was a day's ride from where they hit us," Alaric says. "If these tunnels run anywhere close to that line, we can come up somewhere near it."

"If." I crouch at the mouth of the right side passage, palm flat against the tunnel floor the way I did before we jumped. Nox is somewhere above, a low hum of anticipation in my chest. No matter how much we don’t want to admit it to each other, if something comes at us down here, there is nothing Nox can do from up there. "Nox says north." I stand, “I don’t sense any issues through here.”

"North's a start."

"North is a direction. It's not a way out." I stand, brushing dirt from my knees. "These tunnels don't run straight. I've lost count of the turns twice already but Nox is confident he knows where we are and is directing us to head through here.” As I indicate the tunnel I was just trying to get the vibes of. I don’t know what I am looking for but it's more a lack of feeling. The lack of wrongness and I don't feel any this way but how far is my reach?

Nidmeh looks between us. "Why would something dig this many tunnels? This far under everything?"

"They don't just eat what they kill above ground," Alaric says. "They want corpses. Old ones, buried ones, already gone to rot. Easier meat. Less fight in it." He gestures at the bones, at the branching mouths of the tunnel disappearing into dark on either side. "If that's true, they don't dig toward nothing. They dig toward wherever the dead already are."

I go still. "Graveyards. Old battlefields. Villages that buried their own close to home instead of hauling them out."

"Ashwick's old enough to have all three."

"So is every other place between here and there." I start walking and they follow, sticking close to me as the only light source. "Which means these tunnels could run for miles in every direction and none of them lead anywhere we actually want to be and have the possibility of leading us to an abandoned town or village."

"That's a cheerful thought to carry for the next several hours," Nidmeh says.

"I didn't say it to cheer you."

"No, you said it because you're incapable of softening anything, ever, even slightly, even once." She says it without heat, almost fond. "Has anyone ever told you that you deliver bad news like you're reading a grocery list?"

I stop and turn to her. “I don’t see the benefit of sugarcoating things. Fear freezes people right when they need to move, and you will die. I'd rather you brace for it than be surprised by it.” I start walking again.

"People who want comfort should look elsewhere. This life is hard and you can either be ready for it or let life fuck you in the ass and I prefer my ass to be untouched… by life that is."

“Thanks for that clarification…” Nidmeh scrunches her nose at me. I shrug and continue walking.

I feel Alaric’s stare on my back as I walk ahead a bit, swishing my hips a little. I caught that glint in his eye as I said it and can't seem to help give him a good show. I am wary of him of course but damn if it hasn’t been more than a minute since I’ve been fucked. After what he did to me in the woods, my thoughts won't stop drifting to him. The feel of his tongue and hands… I haven’t been with anyone since my husband passed. Two star-forsaken years and now for the life of me I can’t understand why not? I used to do what I wanted when my body needed it, no thought in sight before I met Gael. Now it's like *can I trust him? What's his angle? Who is he?* Why should I give a shit as long as he knows what he is doing down there, just get what I need and be done. Clean break. But I’m a mother and I’m touched and now I have a dragon that would probably burn any man I tried to sleep with if he got too clingy.

You loved Gael and the thought of being with another was too much after he was gone. We spoke of this many times. Nox intruded on my mind.

I don’t recall those conversations and why would we talk about my sex life? That’s a bit much.

You don’t have memory of your pain?

I was quiet after that because I didn’t. I remember not leaving the house too much but I don't see why I would do that. I know loss and I know pain but thinking of Gael? Nothing.

Let me try something.

Nox just then tries to push something through our bond and I scream in pain. Crashing on my knees, I feel my head splitting in two. I sense Nidmeh and Alaric at my sides but cant hear anything over the rushing blood to my ears and the scratchy images behind my eyes. NOX... pushing my words through the bond was so painful as if there was no room for my message to fit. Our bond was stuffed tight.

As fast as it came, it stopped. The room is spinning and I fall back on my heels. My heart is beating too fast. “Breathe Rynn. Breathe.” Alaric is running a hand up and down my arm in a soft sweeping motion and I start to have a flash back of Gael's face, Gael’s hands doing the same motion lulling me to sleep but then the images cut out and a bright piercing white flashes behind my eyes. I bite my tongue and feel the tang of iron fill my mouth. I am coming back to my surroundings and Nox’s emotions rush me with worry, guilt and a hint of pain from his mind.

How did that not work? What did that Shaman do? Nox is bellowing in agony for me.

What did you do? That really sucked!

I was showing you… attempting to show you images you have shared with me of moments between you and Gael. Moments you have deemed life changing. Even said these are the actions that caused you to grow, adapt, stop just surviving and learn what it truly means to be loved by another.

I just sit there for a moment catching my breath, not sure how to respond. I knew the decision of giving away my memory of being loved would affect me. How could it not but also how can I feel bad about something I don't remember. I do feel a strong painful ache coming from Nox though as if my lack of feeling for Gael is literally breaking his heart.

Alaric helps me stand and Nidmeh is staring at me with fear in her eyes. “I’m ok.” Nidmeh steps in front of me stopping me from stepping forward. “Rynn, you have been jittery for hours. Breathing fast and wringing your hands. What's going on?”

Have I been doing that? I do feel agitated but I wrote that off as being annoyed with Alaric but now that she mentions it… “I don’t think I’m doing so good being underground.” I say honestly.

“Well, no one is doing great down here. This is where Ghasts live, and apparently breed. It makes sense you'd feel off but something else is going on.”

I sigh. “Let’s just keep going. Nox doesn’t see any graveyards or towns close. We need to move.” I really need to see the sky. I need to get out.

The tunnel splits twice more before my light catches on something that stops Nidmeh cold enough that Alaric nearly walks into her.

Blood splashed high across the wall of a side passage, fresh enough that it's still finding its way down in thin lines toward the floor.

Nidmeh doesn't move. Claw marks are evidence of something that already happened, old enough to argue with. This isn't old. This is recent and whatever made it might still be close, might still be feeding, might come back through this same stretch of tunnel before we've gone another hundred feet.

Somewhere down that passage is a person, or what's left of one, and there is nothing any of us could do about it. Not now. Not with three of us, one of them still healing, plus not knowing how many more are down there feeding alongside whatever left this on the wall.

Whoever that blood belonged to is already gone. Grief only slows down the people still breathing, and right now that's the only thing I can afford to keep track of. Nox told me where to go and it's not down that tunnel. My heart is pounding out of my chest as the walls feel as if they are closing in. I will not let my fear take me down. I have been pulling myself out of dark places since I was a child… I am not a survivor, I’m a fucking warrior.

I keep my hand on my dagger and move us forward faster now, away from that passage.



It's Nidmeh who breaks the quiet a while later, once the tunnel's widened enough to walk side by side, the bone walls behind us, nothing ahead but packed dirt, root and dark.

"So," she says, to Alaric, not to me, which is new. "You've been very tight-lipped this whole trip about your own tragic backstory. Everyone else is out on the table. Feels unfair."

"I don't have one."

"Everyone has one. Yours is just boring, or you're hiding it."

"Mostly boring." A pause, and something in his voice shifts, easier than I've heard it. "I've got a friend. Davon. I have known him as long as I can remember anything else."

"That's not boring. That's the first real thing you've said about yourself."

"It's the only thing worth saying."

"What's he like?"

"Worse than me in every way that matters and better in the ones that don't. Talks enough for the both of us. Somehow still alive despite that."

Nidmeh laughs, short and surprised. "I like him already."

"Everyone does. It's a problem."

"And your parents?" She asks it easy, the same rhythm as everything before it, like it belongs in the same breath as the joke about Davon.

Alaric doesn't answer right away. His shoulders tighten as he walks more stiff and his eyebrows draw together while he takes a deep breath.

"Don't have much to say there either," he says finally, and there's nothing easy in it now. His words clipped.

Nidmeh, to her credit, doesn't push.

"Don't we all," he adds, a beat too late, forcing something lighter into it. "Fucked up parents. Universal experience. Should be a club." Nidmeh doesn’t respond right away but instead hangs her head a bit lower.

"I'm teasing, May. Mine weren't around long enough to be fucked up about."

That gets something almost like a real laugh out of him, low and short, and whatever had gone tight in his voice a moment ago eases back into the version of him I've been walking next to all day.

Nidmeh doesn't ask again.

I can hear something… just as Nidmeh and Alaric finish talking and my stomach drops… the cry comes from somewhere ahead, small and thin, unmistakably a child's voice, calling for someone to please, please come find her. I move before I decide to. Every part of me that has ever heard a child cry and gone still with dread is already moving toward the sound, already calculating the fastest route down the passage it's coming from.

"Rynn." Alaric's hand closes hard around my arm. "Stop!"

"There's a child—"

"There's no child." His voice has gone hard. "Listen to it again."

I do. And underneath the crying, threaded through it too perfectly, a second sound. A hum, high and constant, the kind no human throat makes.

The cry stops. Something else takes its place, gathering in the dark above us where my light doesn't reach the ceiling, a sound like wind grieving through a canyon, except there is no wind down here, and no canyon, only dirt that shouldn't have a voice at all.

I don't have to call him. I feel Nox already, a roar of pure fury and helplessness slamming through the bond so hard I stagger.

I can't reach you. I can't get through the ground. Rynn, whatever that is, I can't get to you.

"Down," Alaric says, and shoves Nidmeh flat to the ground as something pale and formless drops out of the dark where the ceiling should be, phasing through solid ground above us like it isn't there at all.

Three more follow it. Their bodies have no real shape, something closer to smoke pulled into a vaguely human outline. At the center of each one a small, cold light pulses like a heartbeat that shouldn't exist outside a chest.

One dives at Nidmeh. She throws out her hands up on reflex, ash scatters from her palm in a wide arc, and where it touches the pale shape it hisses, sizzling like water on a hot pan. The thing recoils with a shriek that sends a pressure smashing the inside of my skull.

"Salt," Nidmeh gasps, already reaching for more. "It's in the ash, has to be. Burns it so it can't—"

Alaric doesn't wait to hear the rest. Wind gathers tight around both fists and he drives it forward in one hard burst, catching the nearest wisp mid-glide and slamming it into the tunnel wall with enough force to bring clumps of dirt falling down. It doesn't die. It screams, thin and glassy, and peels itself off the rock to come again.

I don't think. I reach for the same thing that's been sitting warm under my skin since we entered these tunnels, the thing I've spent hours coaxing into something steady instead of flaring wild, and I let it go all at once.

Light floods the chamber harder and brighter than anything I've managed since we went under. Where it touches the wisps, they don't just recoil, they burn. The pale smoke of them curling and blackening at the edges like

paper held too close to flame, shrieking that same pressure-scream until there's nothing left holding their shape together at all.

The last one dives for me above, and I don't move. I let it come, let the light around me flare brighter instead, and it dissolves before it ever reaches skin, nothing left but a faint, sour smell of something that was never quite alive to begin with. Silence drops back over the tunnel, heavier than before.

Rynn. Nox again, tender and raw. *Tell me you're all right. Tell me right now.*

"We're alive." I say it out loud too, for Alaric and Nidmeh as much as him. My legs don't feel entirely like mine.

Nidmeh is shaking, ash still clutched in one fist, still ready to throw it out at another monster. Alaric pulls her up off the ground, jolting her to the fact that they are gone. For a moment none of us say anything, just breathe, three people standing in the wreckage of something that came out of solid ground from above to hunt us with a dead child's voice.

"Salt in ash," Alaric says finally, voice rough. "I'll remember that."

"You didn't know that would work? Where the hell did you even get it?" I ask her.

"I hoped." Nidmeh laughs, short and shaky, nothing like her usual humor. "Witches carry salt. It's one of the things I learned thieving but didn't know why. Your sister made sure I had some in the pocket of this tunic she gave me." She shows us a side pocket and pulls out the bag holding the remaining salt but doesn’t let go of the scoop in her hand.

“My beautiful sister.” I laugh. The others can’t contain themselves and we all burst out laughing at our ridiculous predicament. After a moment we all stop and listen, forgetting for a moment we may not be alone. I’m losing my mind in this place.

***

The tunnel keeps going. And going. Hours pass, marked only by how far my light dims and flares as my strength ebbs and returns, by the slow, unspoken understanding settling over all three of us that this was never built to lead anywhere in particular. It was built to lead everywhere. There is tension in our small group and the consistent adrenaline is wearing down Nidmeh and hell… all of us. The smell down here is so horrid that I feel it clinging to my skin. I swear if the smell of these Ghasts lingers on me I will use whatever power I can to flood out these tunnels.

Hunger's started to sharpen into something with real edges instead of a background ache. I've felt worse. I've felt this exact kind before, more than once, young enough that I shouldn't remember it as clearly as I do.

"How far do you think we've walked?" Nidmeh asks, somewhere past what feels like the fourth hour, though none of us can say for certain anymore.

"Too far to have covered a day's ride," Alaric says. "Which means either we're going in circles, or..." Alaric turns to me and I raise my eyebrow at him.

“No, Nox did not let us pass it. He says we are quite a few more hours away and considering we were a day away on horseback, Nox is just lessening the blow to how far we really are. We could easily add on an additional day and a half to that.” I look away quickly from them because saying it out loud... It’s too much. That's too long…

My hand finds the wall again, the same gesture I've made a dozen times since we went under, checking that the world outside this dark still exists. "Nox says north," I say, quieter this time. "I don't know how much further but we can’t stop."

Something itches at the edge of my collarbone, small, barely worth noticing. I scratch it, feeling the cold as if it's seeping into my mark.

OceanofPDF.com

CHAPTER NINETEEN

Rynn

I don't remember deciding to sit down. One moment I'm walking, the next the wall is against my back and my legs have stopped working.

"She's been carrying that light for hours," Nidmeh says, and her voice comes from somewhere that sounds farther away than it should. "Since we started and hasn't let it drop once."

"Plus she used it to kill four of the wisps at once." Alaric keeps his voice low and careful, as if that will stop me from hearing him.

I want to tell him to fuck off, talking about me like I'm not right here. The words assemble somewhere in my chest and don't make it any further than that.

"Look at her color." Nidmeh again, closer now, a hand at my jaw turning my face toward what little light I still have left in me. "She's gone grey. That's not tired, Alaric. That's something else."

"She hasn't stopped moving because she doesn't know how."

"This isn't about how tough she is." Alaric's voice comes low but urgent, none of his usual guardedness in it. "I've seen this before. Not with someone like her… nothing like her, but the same panic. When you train the young ones, the new sworn, you watch for exactly this. They call on their gift the first few times and it feels limitless, feels like something they could pour out forever, and they don't stop until it stops them. Doesn't matter how strong the gift is. Doesn't matter if it's the strongest anyone's ever seen. Untrained is untrained."

Something in me, distant and half-buried under everything else, catches on to the fact that a merchant has no business knowing what the young sworn look like mid-collapse on a training yard. I don't have the strength to hold onto the thought. It slides away before I can do anything with it.

"She's never had to ration it," Alaric goes on. "Doesn't know what holding this long costs her, so she doesn't know to stop before it takes something she can't get back."

I've been through worse. I survived the worst. I just need to move.

I can't breathe right, though, and I hate that my body's decided to prove his point for him. The edges of everything have gone soft and black, the tunnel narrowing down to a pinpoint. My ears are ringing, high and constant, underneath the sound of my own name being said by at least two different voices. Cold sweat at the back of my neck despite the chill everywhere else. My hands won't stop shaking, small and useless, like they belong to someone with far less practice holding a blade steady than I have.

I'm fine, I tell Nox, mostly out of spite, because some old, stubborn part of me refuses to let anyone, dragon included, watch me go down without an argument first.

You are the furthest thing from fine. Nox's voice comes sharp, scared underneath the sharpness. *Your heart is doing something it shouldn't. I can feel it stuttering from here.*

Everyone's a physician today.

Rynn.

I'm sitting up aren't I?

Barely. And only because Nidmeh hasn't let go of you.

"Rynn." Nidmeh's hand doesn't leave my face. "You need to let the light go. Now. Not in a minute. Now."

I don't remember choosing to listen. I only remember the dark coming down soft and total the second I stopped fighting to hold the light up, and how much quieter everything got the instant I did, like the whole tunnel exhaled with me.

Nidmeh eases me down onto the dirt, and I hear her say something to Alaric I don't catch, quiet and clipped. Alaric's answer is muffled, and then nothing at all, because sleep takes me before I can ask either of them what they're so afraid of.



I come back to myself slowly, which is its own kind of wrong. Nothing about the last day has been slow.

There's a faint glow still coming off my own skin, banked low, the mark along my collarbone dim but not fully dark, like something in me kept burning even after I stopped choosing to. It's enough to make out shapes in the dark, if barely. Nidmeh's asleep sitting up against the wall, chin dropped to her chest. Alaric is close, closer than he'd normally sit, watching me in that same low light I'm apparently still leaking out.

I don't know how long I was out. Long enough that my mouth tastes like old copper and my whole body feels borrowed, like I climbed back into it after leaving it somewhere else for a while.

"There she is." Alaric, quiet. He doesn't move closer. "You scared her."

"I scared myself too, if it helps."

"It doesn't, really."

I sit up slow, testing each part of me before I trust it with weight. Everything answers, eventually, though nothing answers fast. Whatever that was, it left something behind. My chest still doesn't feel fully mine, like whatever nearly stopped in there hasn't finished starting back up.

Nidmeh stirs at the sound of me moving, blinking awake fast as if she had trained herself not to sleep too deep and my heart aches for her. Her eyes find me first, checking, before she's even fully conscious of doing it.

"You're up." Not a question. Relief, badly disguised as fact.

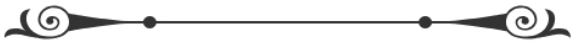
"I'm up."

"Don't do that again." She says it lighter than she means it, I can tell, the joke doing work her voice isn't steady enough to do on its own.

"I'll take it under advisement."

Alaric doesn't say anything, but his knee is now touching my leg and warmth starts seeping in and I feel I can take a deeper breath. Nobody mentions how close that was. Nobody has to. I reach for what's left of the food out of habit more than hunger, mostly to give my hands something to do that isn't shaking.

We eat what's left in silence, and then we walk, because staying still any longer feels like giving something permission to catch up to us.

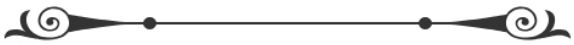


Hour ten, or somewhere close to it. I've stopped trusting my own count.

The itch at my collarbone hasn't stopped since I first noticed it. It's spread now, thin lines of unease threading between the points of the mark like something tracing a constellation, from my collarbones back over my shoulders, converging toward my spine, the one place along it I have never once, in twenty-six years, been able to reach on my own. I try to scratch anyway. My nails come away with nothing under them, no relief, no blood, just skin scraped raw everywhere I've been able to reach.

"You're going to make yourself bleed if you don't stop," Nidmeh says.

I don't reply. I don't stop either.



By hour fifteen, walking has become a decision I have to make separately with each leg.

My skin has gone the color of the tunnel walls, pale in a way that has nothing to do with the desert leaving me, and everything to do with something deciding it doesn't want to hold me together anymore. My bones ache in places bones shouldn't ache, deep, structural, the kind of pain that isn't an injury so much as a body running out of something it needs. My neck won't release. I keep turning my head, left, right, chasing a crack that won't come, muscle locked so tight across my shoulders that Nidmeh flinches when she sees me do it the third time.

The smell down here has stopped being something I notice and started being something I wear. It's in my hair, my skin, under my nails, and some part of me, some old and terrible part, remembers another smell I couldn't wash off, another stretch of days where standing on my own two feet wasn't

a thing my body was allowed to do, where someone else decided when I could move and I had no say in the matter at all. I don't let myself follow that thought.

I want the desert so badly it feels like its own kind of hunger. Not water, not food, though I want those too. I want dry heat instead of this wet cold that's found its way into every joint I have. I want the gold Cadryn sky an hour before dark, when the whole sky bleeds orange into rose into a violet so deep it looks like something bruised, and every rooftop in the ward catches the last of the light before the cold comes down fast the way it only does in the desert. I want the wind up high, the kind only Nox has ever let me feel, thin and clean and so cold it burns going down, nothing like this stale, mineral air that's been breathed by the same three lungs for what feels like days now. I have flown above clouds no one else will ever see, watched the sun catch the sand dunes and turn them the color of embers before nightfall swallows all of it whole. I want it so badly right now it's painful, separate from everything else that already hurts.

Down here there's no sunset. No wind. No sky to prove the world outside this tunnel still exists at all.

"Sit down," Nidmeh says. "Now. Not a suggestion."

I go to sit because my legs agree with her before I do. "Look at you, Overlady, who put the sixteen-year-old in charge?" I look at Alaric, who gives me a half smile, but his face is soft, as if he's staring at a 300-year-old Woken, and it pisses me off. I am not some fragile thing that's going to break and I will not be pitied.

"Stop looking at me like that," I snap, sharper than I mean to, sharper than Alaric deserves. It's the last thing that feels like mine… the anger, the teeth in it before something bigger than anger closes in.

Alaric doesn't flinch. Doesn't look away, but something shifts in his face. The softness sharpening into something else entirely, something low and deliberate. He leans down, close enough to my ear that his voice is only for me.

"How do you want me to look at you?"

The words drag down my spine like something with claws, and every instinct I have narrows to one animal thought… that I want his hands on me instead, want teeth instead of pity, want anything that isn't gentle. It should scare me, how much I want to be marked instead of minded. I want to claw out of my own skin and I want him to be the one who does it. I clench my

thighs together on instinct and turn my head without realizing it, feeling his breath on my lips. He hasn’t backed away yet and if I don’t throw myself on him now I will scream.

"Talk to me," she says, kneeling in front of me, hands hovering like she doesn't know where it's safe to touch. "What's happening? Tell me and I'll believe you, whatever it is." I turn to look at her so fast my neck aches. I am slammed back to this moment… in the cave… with a child… with the monsters.

I don't have words yet. The itch is screaming now, under my skin, and pressure closes around my chest as the flashes hit— sunset, constellations, the cave, Nidmeh's voice bleeding into the memory of the Ghast running at her. I can't tell which moment is real. Can't get my mind to hold still long enough to focus.

Rynn. Nox's voice, and even through the bond I can hear something wrong in it, an edge that shouldn't be there. *Talk to me. Breathe.*

I don't have space to spare for him either.

Nidmeh is starting to talk and I catch pieces but I can’t keep up with her. Then she grabs my hands in hers. "There was a woman in the ward who kept bees. Real hives, working ones, which nobody thought could survive somewhere that dirty, but they did." Her voice stays low, even. "She used to let me stand close and watch them work. Told me bees always find their way home no matter how far they fly, because they remember the smell of their own hive stronger than any other smell in the world."

I don't know why it helps. It shouldn't. It's not an exit, not air, not sky. But something in my chest loosens by a fraction, enough to focus on her face.

"I used to think," she goes on, quieter, "that if I ever found somewhere that felt like that, I'd know it the way the bees know it. I still don't know if I have. But I think about the smell of honey sometimes, when things are bad."

Nidmeh slowly lays me down and I go without a thought. The dirt is cold through my cloak, and Nidmeh lies down on her side, facing me, her hand finding mine and closing around it. I close my eyes as she continues to talk and her voice lulls me to relax. My eyes close as my breathing evens out and under my other palm that's flat on the dirt, faint, I feel something rise up out of the ground itself. Small. Grounding. Threads of something I've never felt before now pull up into my skin as if nothing is separating my skin and earth. It isn't enough. But it's something, and something is more

than I had a minute ago. I feel the pressure in my head ease and the itch on my skin become now a small irritation.

I sleep.



I wake already moving.

Not slow. Not confused. No soft climb up out of sleep the way waking usually happens. One second I'm on the ground with Nidmeh's hand loose in mine, and the next I'm on my feet, body deciding before my mind has any say in it, every part of me pulling toward a direction I can't name and don't need to.

I have to get out.

The thought isn't a thought. It's older than thought, further down than reason, a body that has spent its whole life learning what it needs to survive and has just decided, with total conviction, that the thing keeping it alive right now is somewhere above this ceiling of dirt and root and it is not negotiable.

I run.

The tunnel is black and I don't care. My hands find the walls when I need them and let go when I don't. It's a passing thought that I have this instinct in me able to already tell when a turn is coming and I just move. I have done this before. Not this exactly but similar. The body locked, the walls too close, no window, no door, no one believing you when you say you cannot stay in this position one more second… I know this. I have lived through the long version of this once already, days of it, unable to move, unable to reach, screaming into a stillness that answered with laughs, and some part of me has never fully let go.

Somewhere behind me, Alaric's voice, sharp, urgent, calling my name once and then giving up on words entirely, because there's no time to explain and I will not spend a second longer explaining myself. I need to get out.

"Rynn—" Nidmeh, farther back, breathless.

Sky. It’s all I can give Nox. *I need the sky.*

I feel it too. His voice comes fast, low, alarmed in a way that scares me more than anything my own body is doing. *Something's pulling at you from above. I can feel it through the stone.*

I won't stop. I can't. My children are waiting on the other side of this fucking dirt and there is nothing rotting, clawed or hiding in this dark that gets to decide I don't make it back to them. Let a wisp try me. Let every last Ghast in this tunnel come at me. I will tear through all of it with my bare hands if that's what it costs, and I will still be standing when it's done, because that is the only outcome I am willing to accept. I did not get soft from the celebrations and adornments or the riches and wines they gave me for being The Touched. My life did bring me some joy but the pain and survival I went through ensured I would never trust others to protect me. I protect myself and I will not die in this tunnel.

Good. Nox's voice comes back hard, none of the alarm from a moment ago left. *Then hear me. If it comes to a choice down there, you do not think about it. Not for one second. Not for half of one. Alaric can fight. Nidmeh can run. You get to me. You have always come first with me and you always will, above every other living thing in this realm, and I will not apologize for that to anyone, least of all you.*

I don't slow down.

Rynn, his voice has become closer to panic, matching mine, feeding it. *I can't get to you. I can't feel where the tunnel ends. I don't know where you are.*

I'm coming.

Every breath I have goes toward pushing my legs and lungs and nothing else.

He thinks something is hunting me. I can feel it, his fear shifting, readying itself for violence, for fire, for anything he can throw at whatever's chasing me through the dark. There is nothing chasing me. There has never been anything chasing me except the thing that's always waited behind my own ribs, screaming to be found.

Behind me, more distant than before, I hear Alaric say something short to Nidmeh, and her voice answering, thin with effort but still finding room for something almost like humor. "Absolutely not. Put me down."

"I'm not putting you down. You can't keep up."

"I'm aware of that, thank you, that doesn't mean you get to just pick me up like—"

"Do you want to get left behind, or do you want to hold on?"

A pause, grudging. "Fine. But if you drop me, I'm haunting you specifically."

I don't look back to see it happen but his footsteps are heavier now and still somehow not losing more ground on me. The tunnel bends. Narrows. Opens. I feel it before I see it, the air changing, losing its mineral weight, gaining something colder and cleaner underneath. Then there's a gap in the ground above, small, ragged at the edges, moonlight spilling down through it in a single pale column, and through that gap, impossibly, unbearably, stars.

I stop running the second I feel them on me.

My body stops, feet rooted, face turned up, and for one long moment I forget entirely that I have lungs that need air or a heart that needs to keep beating, because none of that matters as much as the fact that the sky exists, still, exactly where I left it.

I stand in the column of moonlight, still, silent, and I don't hear Alaric arrive until his breathing does, ragged and close.

He stops a few feet away. I feel him go still too just staring. I am half aware of Nidmeh sliding down off his back from the corner of my eye, both of them watching me the way you'd watch something you're afraid to interrupt.

But I don’t care what they see or what has stopped them. I'm not out of breath. That's the strange part, the part I'll think about later. I ran until my legs should have given out and I'm not gasping the way they are. My whole body is holding perfectly still, and I didn’t realize until now how I haven't had stillness the whole time we have been down here. Through this gap, is the only quiet that's ever actually let me rest.

"I need to go there," I say. My voice comes out cracked and layered, strange, like more than one version of me is speaking at once.

Alaric doesn't ask what I mean. He steps closer instead, and I feel the air shift around me, wind gathering slow and careful, curling up from the ground beneath my feet but I don't take my eyes off the night sky above.

"I've got you," he says. "Just hold still a second longer."

He doesn't need to tell me twice. I'm already holding as still as I have ever held anything.

The wind lifts me, gentle, insistent, and I feel my feet leave the ground.

There you are.

Nox's voice floods through the bond whole and unbroken for the first time since the earth swallowed me, relief and fury and something close to grief all tangled together in three words. I feel him before I see him, a pull at my chest stronger than the wind carrying me, and then I'm through the gap, into open sky, into cold clean air, into a night so thick with stars I could weep from the sight of them alone.

He's already there, wings beating slow and steady, and I don't remember choosing to reach him. One moment I'm rising through the gap in the earth, and the next I'm astride him, high above the black canopy of the forest, the stars wheeling close enough to touch.

I am free.

I let my legs stretch long against Nox's back as he smooths out and the wind gently glides through my hair, Nox maneuvering his head and wings to remove the strong wind so I can let go of holding his spikes right at the dip between his neck and back and I just lie down, boots pointed at the stars like I could kick them loose and just sleep for eternity. I haven't felt this kind of escape, this specific, uncomplicated freedom in many years, the kind that has nothing to do with being strong and everything to do with being allowed to live.

Down there I was held still. Down there something in me had to lie flat on cold ground and let two other people decide when I was safe to stand again. Up here there's nothing holding me anywhere. No ceiling. No walls. No one telling me what my body is or isn't allowed to do. Just distance in every direction, and Nox beneath me, and the wind taking whatever's left of the smell of that place and scattering it somewhere I vow, I will never smell again.

I laugh, short and disbelieving, the sound swallowed instantly by open air. I don't remember the last time I laughed like that, for no reason at all except that I could.

Keep going, I tell Nox, when his wings start to level out like he's thinking about turning back. *Not yet. Further.*

You need rest, Rynn.

I need this more.

He doesn't argue again. He flies, banking wide over the canopies, taking me further from that hole in the ground. The stars pull at the buzz behind my ribs, ancient, patient, mine. I understand, without a single word spoken, that this isn't only light falling from far away. It's calling my name the way

Nox calls my name, the way my own blood calls my name when I've been away from myself too long. Every living thing beneath us hums at the edge of my awareness, faint but present, root and wing and heartbeat, the whole breathing shape of the realm laid out under the same sky holding me. I am not separate from any of it right now. I don't know how to be.

My skin glows brighter with every breath, gold bleeding into blue bleeding into a violet I've never seen it hold before, until I look down at my own arms and can't tell anymore where my body ends and the light begins. I feel at one with it all.

You scared me, Nox says, quieter now, the words trembling with something he doesn't usually let through. *I couldn't find you. I have never once not been able to find you.*

I found the sky instead. It found me.

Don't ever do that again.

I didn't have a choice.

I know. A pause, longer than usual, heavier. *Still don't do it.* I laugh again, smiling wider than I knew possible.

Below us, small against the dark treeline, I see Alaric and Nidmeh watching, two shapes tipped back with their faces turned up. Even from this height I can see the exact moment Alaric stops watching the sky and starts watching only me instead.

I have never in my life been a whole day without seeing the stars. Not once. Not through every terrible year, not through every home that tried to break something out of me, I always had a way to see the sky. I didn't know until tonight that they were something I needed the way I need air, the way I need my own heartbeat, until the one day I lost them nearly took the rest of me down with it.

I let the sky pour into me until there's no more room left, until for one single suspended hour, I am exactly as bright as everything else burning in it.

OceanofPDF.com

CHAPTER TWENTY

Rynn

Snow crunches under my boots the second Nox sets me down.

Alaric and Nidmeh are already waiting at the treeline, two shapes gone still in the dark, and for one more second I let myself stay close to Nox, forehead against the warm scales at the base of his neck, not ready yet to be a body that has to walk and decide things.

We could go home, Nox says, and there's no judgment in the offer, no weight attached to taking it. *No one would call it wrong.*

I think about it. I let myself actually think about it, for the first time since the ground shook under Cadryn. Home. The twins asleep with Calla several days south from me, safe behind wards that I've bled to help build. I could disappear into that. Stay small. Let the realm sort out its own rot without my hands in it.

I know before I finish the thought that I can’t do that. It has never once been in me to put my head in the sand and let something like that, the savagery Cadryn suffered, happen to people who never had a chance to fight back but this isn't about the realm. I don't know why the universe reached down and put its hand on me instead of someone else. Whatever I was made for, whatever a Touched actually means, none of that is what gets me back on my feet tonight.

Someone is responsible for my children’s heartache. Someone took it upon themselves to instill fear in their bones. All I’ve wanted was my children to be free of this world's true evil. The pain of understanding what

man can do to man. A world that rots. This evil took it upon themselves to hurt my kids. It's only fair that I return the gesture by cutting its heart out.

I slide down off Nox's back.

"We keep going," I say.

Nidmeh doesn't argue. Alaric watches me in silence with his arms crossed and shifts his weight like he's ready to argue, then doesn’t.



Ashwick announces itself the way most border towns do this far north, with smoke first, then rooftops but what's different here is the quiet, no dogs barking, no argument spilling out of a doorway, nothing.

We get to the market of the small town. The few people out on the street move with heads down. Quick steps to whatever shop they need, then the door pulls shut immediately behind them. A woman herds her two children through the snow-covered market row, moving faster as she notices Alaric and when he looks ahead, I see her eyes narrow in disgust at his back. An old man sweeping his stoop goes still as we pass, broom held tight against his chest, knuckles pale.

We restock what we can. Dried meat, a second blanket for Nidmeh, a whetstone for my blade that I inspect longer than the merchant probably expects, checking his work before I hand over a single coin. It's the first real town any of us have stood in since Fenrow's Cross, and the relief of it, walls, roofs, other people’s voices, only lasts until I notice what's nailed to the post outside the trading post.

Papers. A couple dozen of them, weathered soft at the edges like they've been rained on and replaced more than once. Children's faces, drawn rough, names and ages beneath. The youngest is three.

I'm focused on one when Alaric catches up and stands quiet while my gloved finger stays under one name, reading it over and over and I can't bring my eyes to look at more. Is this a child we saw down…

"There's more inside," the shopkeeper says, coming out to shake snow off a rug and catching us looking. He's older, the kind of tired that no amount of sleep will fix. "We run out of nails before we run out of names, most seasons."

"How many?" I ask.

"Lost count keeping an honest one." The Woken male glances at the paper in my hand but then quickly swings his gaze elsewhere as if he can’t look at it straight on. "Sent parties out after the first dozen or so. Years back now. Some of those men didn't come home either. Ones that did, don't talk about it much. They say something finds you before you ever get a look at what it is. It sees you, and you're just gone."

"Gone how," I ask.

"Just… gone. No trace of ‘em after." He shrugs, and continues to remove the snow. "Curfew's at sundown now. Been that way going on five years, maybe eight, depending who you ask about when it started. No children play in the open anymore. Yards only, and someone grown standing watch even then. Nobody knows what it is. Everybody's got a blade on them regardless."

"Why doesn't anyone leave," I ask, not caring about being direct because… fuck this. Years, not weeks. Not one bad season everyone gritted through and forgot but years, and the whole town just built a curfew around it and called that living.

He opens his mouth to answer, and that's when his eyes find Alaric properly, a stranger's face giving way to something he recognizes. His shoulders climb. His eyes drop to the ground before his mouth catches up. Whatever Alaric is to this town, he's not a merchant people bow their heads to by accident.

"We're lucky," he says, and his voice has picked up a new formality, careful in a way it wasn't a breath ago. "King Maerek's been generous through all of it. Sees to it we're not forgotten out here. A King who loves his people."

He gives Alaric a small bow, brief, practiced, the kind you learn so your body does it before your mind has to agree, and finds somewhere else to be.

That isn't gratitude. It's fear. He's smart enough to know which one keeps him safe to say out loud in front of Alaric. My face doesn't show any of my concerns but I will get away from him. Now.

I wait until we're a few shops down, snow starting to come down thin and lazy over the street, before I say it.

"Nidmeh and I will go our own way from here."

Alaric stops walking. "No."

"That wasn't a request I was making, but thank you for the concern." I say it light, almost amused, tucking the whetstone into my pack like this is nothing, like I haven't just told him I'm walking away from everything he's spent weeks maneuvering me toward. "You've been useful. Genuinely. I mean that. But whatever your goal is here, with me, it’s done. Go tell your king it didn't work."

I look up at him when I say it, and something bright and reckless moves through my chest, the kind of feeling I haven't let myself have in years, that *you only live once* current that's kept me moving forward my whole life instead of standing still long enough to be afraid.

"You're not going anywhere but Korreth," he says.

"Careful. That almost sounded like a threat." I'm already walking again, unhurried, like the whole conversation was never really a negotiation to begin with. "I don't take well to those. Ask literally anyone."

He catches up to me in two strides. "Rynn."

"That's my name." I glance sideways at him, and I can feel my own mouth doing something traitorous. "Oh. No more cute nickname?"

He doesn't answer that and it pleases me more than I thought it would.

I keep walking. His hand closes around my arm before I clear the next stall, not hard, but not asking either, and the air around him changes before he says a single word more. Pressure first, seeping into my skin and then the smell, air gone metal and sharp, the way it does just before a storm breaks. It’s rolling off his skin like something underneath him just woke up.

A warning roars somewhere past the treeline south of town, too far to reach us in time to matter and both of us know it but Nox is not rescuing yet just informing Alaric to step back. He doesn’t and I don't pull away. I want to hear what Alaric thinks is worth saying badly enough to summon a storm.

"Five minutes," he says. "Then you walk, and I won't stop you again."

Nidmeh's two shops down, out of sight around the corner. She can wait five minutes.

"Talk fast." I take a step back, crossing my arms.

His jaw works like the words are painful. "I'm not a merchant. I'm the King's High Shadow." He says the title flat, like a man setting down something heavy he's carried too long to feel proud of anymore. "Seven years of mandatory service, so far. I was given a handful of months clear. I wanted to see the desert. Feel the sun the way it hits skin down there, since

it never does here." A pause, like he's deciding how much further to go. "Posing as a merchant got me into the Solennes. The royal parties. Cadryn's court, watching how people live without a blade or a uniform in every doorway."

"Congrats on your reprieve?"

"And… I saw you." He isn't looking at anything else now. "At the Aldenmere estate. You walked into that room and I lost the thread of whatever I was doing."

Sweet talk doesn't come easy to him. This is a challenge for him, each word dragged out slower than the last, a man translating in a language he never learned properly.

"I'd never seen anyone marked like you." His hand comes up before I decide whether to let it, fingers trailing the line of my shoulder to my collarbone where the stars scatter in the center of my chest. "I wanted to know where they went. All of them."

I don't step back. A shiver I don't get to approve of runs up my spine. "How flattering." I let my voice go bored, bored the way I've perfected on men who think staring hard enough at a woman's tits constitutes courtship. "Grateful I managed to catch your eye at a party. Truly. Life's complete now."

I turn to go. He doesn't let me get the full step. His hand catches my jaw this time and gently pulls me back to him, tipping my face up to where his eyes are fixed on mine, unwilling to let go. I feel his breath on my lips. "It wasn't just your body," he says, low. "There was something in your eyes at that party. Not magic. Something underneath the smile you were giving everyone else in that room, defiant, like you'd already decided nothing there could touch you." A pause, like he's still working out how to say the next part. "Then I watched you with your son. In the lane, when those men grabbed you. I've seen soldiers with twenty years of killing in them flinch less than you did standing still. You looked like a mountain in the middle of a flood. Then I saw you with your children during the attack, a fierceness I've never witnessed, defending everything you loved. I needed to know more, what was underneath it. And I need more still, Ruin. I need all of you."

Nobody was supposed to see those moments. I've spent years learning restraint like a second language, making sure no one gets that close to see

me, and he didn't even have to try and I don’t know how to process this unexpected awareness of me.

"Did you practice that in the mirror?" I scoff and try to pull back on the last word but he doesn't let me. One broad hand comes up quick, cradling the back of my head, and brings me to him in one motion. Then his mouth is on mine and I stop thinking altogether.

His tongue pushes my lips apart and I let him in without a fight I don't actually want to win. His hands find my waist, then lower, and somewhere in the space of three steps he's walked us both backward into the gap between two shop walls, snow falling soft around us, into shadow deep enough that the street forgets we exist.

I'm panting hard as soon as our lips part and his mouth finds the spot just beneath my ear sucking on my skin, slow but hard. The sound that comes out of me isn't one I'd have allowed myself around anyone else. He answers it with a low growl against my skin, and I don't remember deciding to hook my leg around his, only that I have, and that he already knows exactly what to do with it, his knee rising to press against the ache building low and insistent between my thighs.

He moves his lips back to mine and I grind hard on his leg while my hands fists in his incredible hair. He slips both his hands under my ass pushing me down more onto him. He grunts, and I feel his thickness pushing onto my hip bone causing my knees to shake. I bite down on the next sound before it fully escapes.

A cough, deliberately loud, cuts through the alley like a slap.

Nidmeh stands at the mouth of the gap with her arms crossed and an expression that says she has seen exactly enough to never unsee it. "Please. There are children in this town. Somewhere… and no one wants to see this."

Alaric straightens first, and does an admirable job pretending his hands weren't anywhere they were thirty seconds ago. I take slightly longer, mostly because my knees haven't fully agreed to hold me up yet.

"You good?" I ask Nidmeh, adjusting my collar like that fixes anything.

"Traumatized. Otherwise fine." But there's something almost pleased underneath the disgust on her face, quick and gone before she lets it show fully. "Can we please just get going? I want to reach Korreth before nightfall. I do not want to sleep out in this snow."

Since our horses were burned by Nox, which he's already complained was a waste of a good meal, we needed another solution. The snow was getting thick, treacherous enough to make walking a bad idea. We were able to obtain a sledge from the trading post, low and wide, its runners scarred from years of use, along with a second horse harnessed in front to pull it since one alone wouldn't manage the weight of three of us and what's left of our supplies. The shopkeeper doesn't haggle the price down, not with Alaric standing beside me. If anything, the man looks like he'd rather hand it over for free and never see either of us again. With Cadryn's crown footing my expenses, I shouldn't need to care about a fair price but old habits die hard.

Nidmeh piles into the back first, wrapped in every blanket we own, muttering something about never complaining about horseback again as long as she lives. Alaric takes the reins without being asked. I sit close enough to Nidmeh to share the warmth and far enough from Alaric that neither of us has to explain the last hour to anyone, including ourselves.

The road narrows fast past Ashwick's edge, snow packed hard enough in places to hold the sledge's weight and soft enough in others to slow it to a crawl. Nox keeps low overhead when the tree cover allows it, close enough that I feel the warmth of him. He hasn't said anything about the alley. I know he felt all of it anyway.



Korreth's border announces itself the same way the town did. Smoke first. Then walls, grey stone rising out of white ground as if it had been here for an age. We are still several hours from the castle at the center of the capital but we start to see movement and shops come into view.

When we reach the human district, my mouth dries. It is so quiet that I only hear the wind moving through the narrow streets. As we pass some broken down buildings that are similar to Cadryn’s human ward but rather than tarps and blankets separating homes they have slabs of stone to keep out the cold but if there is no fire in there they might as well be living in an ice box. The doors have iron rings bolted at the base instead of proper latches and I do see one small structure with chimney smoke. A line forms outside a ration house, twenty or so people standing in snow already ankle

deep, none of them speaking to each other, all of them watching the ground. Nidmeh pulls her fur coat tighter around her and steps closer to me.

Every third person wears a collar. Thin, iron, plain enough to almost pass for jewelry if you didn't know what it meant. I know what it means and I go very still as I see the first one.

I don't say anything. I don't need to. Alaric feels me go quiet beside him the same way I've learned to feel him tense before a fight, and I know he's bracing for whatever I'm about to ask before I ask it.

"No witches," I say eventually, once we've crossed into streets wide enough to breathe in again. "I haven't seen a single one since we crossed into Korreth. You said they were tolerated here."

"They are."

"Then where are they?"

"West," he says. "There are witch settlements further into the kingdom, closer to the mountains. They prefer their own communities. Less exposure this far east, this close to court."

It comes out smooth. Too smooth. I've spent twenty-six years learning exactly what a lie sounds like when someone's said it enough times to stop flinching, and this is that, word for word. I don't call it. Not yet. I file it next to the collars, next to the bow the shopkeeper gave him, next to every other piece he's handed me half true, and I let him think I've let it go. His words rang true enough back in Ashwick. So why lie about the witches now? Maybe he isn't. Maybe I've just stopped being able to tell the difference. After a lie, all truth becomes suspicion.



The roads widen the closer we get to the capital, cleared and salted, lined with Woken on horseback and in furs that cost more than most families see in a season. I haven't seen a single human face since we left the ward behind, no farmers, no laborers, just Woken. They move through their own kingdom like the rest of the realm doesn't exist, heads held high, looking down their noses at each other, cataloguing clothes, jewels, posture. We overhear a Woken woman murmuring about someone named Sysil walking

too close to a married man. Then I feel it, the weight of a gaze on my skin. People are starting to notice me.

It happens gradually and then all at once, a woman crossing the road early to avoid passing too close, a merchant's gaze snagging on me and then dropping fast, someone's sharp intake of breath behind a gloved hand. Nobody says the word Touched out loud. Nobody has to. I've felt this before, distantly, on the edges of Cadryn's court, but never this concentrated, never this many strangers all flinching from something in me they can't name or don't understand.

Horses do the opposite. A pair tethered outside a smithy strains toward me the second I pass, ears forward, eyes wide, tracking me. Further on a hawk drops low over the road and circles once before wheeling off, like it wanted a closer look and got one. I've stopped being surprised by any of it. I don't know why the realm's smaller creatures lean toward me while its people lean away. It's been this way since I was a child, horses calming the second I'm near them, rattlesnakes uncoiling and stilling instead of striking when I pass too close, never once earning the warning rattle a stranger would. Even the plants seem to know me. They grow a little faster near me, and flowers turn to follow wherever I stand, like I'm something worth facing.

We continue walking and Nidmeh is so close to me I might as well be carrying her. But I don’t give her shit. We both know I have a power that others naturally stay away from but she is a witch, which Woken can sense.

The inn Alaric brings us to sits in the wealthier stretch of the Woken quarter, warm light spilling gold from every window, nothing like the boarded human district behind us. He has us wait around the back, in an alley half-buried in fresh snow, while he goes in the front alone.

"What's going on," I ask, when he returns and leads us in through a servant's door instead.

"Unclean," he says, not quite meeting my eyes, gesturing at the state of all three of us, dirt and tunnel grime none of us have had the chance to wash off properly. "Front desk won't have travelers looking like this walking through the main hall past paying guests. I paid ahead. Cleaner this way."

I shrug agreeing with him that we stink. He gets us two rooms. Nidmeh and I share one, small but warm, a real bed with real blankets that neither of us has earned the right to appreciate properly in weeks. Alaric takes the room beside us, alone.

Before either of us settles, I sit Nidmeh down at the edge of the bed and press something small and warm into her palm, a smooth grey stone, the twin of one I gave Calla with my own hands the week I first had coin enough to save her.

"I'm not bringing you into that castle," I tell her. "You stay here."

"Rynn—"

“As soon as I leave in the morning you are to leave immediately and go to Nox. He will be waiting for you in the evergreens just past the bakery shop we saw three blocks back.” I close her hand around the stone. “This will allow you to communicate with Calla if I don’t return at sundown tomorrow. Just hold it close and think of Calla. Stay with Nox.”

“Why? What's going on? I don’t understand. I thought you were just leaving for a few hours and then we would head back? Together?”

"That is still the plan, but plans have a way of falling apart, especially when dealing with kings. If I am not back, you don't wait for me. You don't come looking. You go straight to Calla's, and you use the other half of this to tell her I'm not coming." My voice doesn't shake saying it, though something underneath it wants to. "Promise me."

She looks at the stone a long moment, then closes her fingers around it, and when her eyes come back to meet mine she starts slowly shaking her head and her eyes are about to pop out of her head. She grips my arm so tight I know she'll leave indents and words seem to be stuck in her throat. I soften my voice, soften my face, relax my shoulders— the performance I've come to call manipulation.

"Listen. Everything is going to be fine. I don't know if we can trust Alaric, but I know I can trust my gut, and it says to get you somewhere safe. And there is nowhere safer in this realm than with the scariest, meanest dragon around."

I give her my sweetest smile and pull her in for a hug. She relaxes, then chokes out a laugh.

"Nox is the only dragon anyone's seen in five hundred years."

"Exactly."

I leave her with a wink and head for the washroom. The second my back is turned, I roll my eyes. I hate coddling. I know she's just a kid, that she's looking to me for direction, that she deserves more than a hug and a smile and a change of subject — but we can't exactly sit down for a heart-to-heart about my fears and trust issues when neither of us knows what Alaric can

hear through his door. So the conversation gets cut short. Quickly. Cleanly. The way I do everything.

Some days I want to skip the performance entirely and just yell ‘Do what I say and stop asking fucking questions, you asked for this.’ But being wound this tight is my weight to carry, not hers, so I swallow it, the way I swallow most things, and let her keep her hug instead.

Tomorrow I meet a king I know nothing about, to ask some questions that could cost blood, and I don't have a plan. But I do know how to charm and the power radiating from me has always made others back away, so I'm sure I'll be fine. Also, now that Alaric has admitted to working closely with him, at least getting in the room won't be the problem.



Sleep doesn't come, not for a long time, not with tomorrow sitting on my chest like a second body I have to carry into that castle.

I hear Nidmeh finally drop off beside me, breathing gone slow and even, exhaustion from the tunnels finally catching up to her all at once, the way it does when a body's been running on nothing but nerves for too many days straight. It’s been already another hour of listening to her sleep, my own mind turning over the collars in the human district, the way throngs of strangers gasped and looked away from me on the road in, the lie about witches gone west, until lying still becomes its own kind of unbearable.

I find myself outside Alaric’s door before I've fully decided to knock. He opens it fast, like he wasn't sleeping either, like some part of him was waiting for me. His hair is no longer tied back and hangs in wet curls around his face. His scent hits me and it’s hard not to inhale him, sandalwood and cedar, drawing me closer to him and I forget entirely why I am here.

How have we traveled together for six days on the road and I’ve never once seen this? He seems to take up more space than he ever has, chest and shoulders fill the doorway, bare, and for a second it's all I can look at.

There's more ink than I expected. More than what I glimpsed that first time on his forearm. My eye catches it first, red lines branching up from his wrist, spreading toward his elbow like something still deciding where it

wants to end. It doesn't sit on top of his skin the way the ink does; it sits underneath it.

But the ink he chose doesn't stop at his arms. It climbs over his shoulders and onto his chest, where the black etchings seem to cover scars larger than on his arms.

I step closer without deciding to and trace one line without meaning to, my finger following a burn scar half swallowed by black runes, and he goes very still under my hand. His breathing quickens as I slide along the marks, his skin warm and taut under my palm, heat radiating off him like he's standing too close to his own fire. In a trance, some part of me is drawn to the shapes and letters though they belong to no language I've seen.

Something else moves through me at the same time, quieter, underneath the pull of his skin against my fingers. The same certainty that's been settling into me more since the low market, some part of me that knows what belongs to this realm and what doesn't. Whatever's woven into him doesn't belong here. It was made. Placed. And it's gripping something in him, tight, like a hand closed around a wrist and will never let go.

His breath comes hard on my neck and a chill goes up my spine. I instantly drop my hand and take a step back realizing only now that he's braced one arm against the doorframe, gripping it hard, holding himself in place, every muscle in his arm pulled tight under his skin. His only cover is a towel wrapped low around his waist, a thin line of soft dark hair trailing from his navel down, and I can't see where it ends. My mouth goes dry over something that has nothing to do with fear.

My gaze shoots back to him at the thought, and the gold ring around his pupils burns bright against the blue storming in his irises.

I attempt to find words but they evade me.

"Ask." His voice is low and restrained.

"That one's not decoration, is it?" I gesture to the unnatural red veins wrapped around his forearm.

His jaw works once. "No."

"A witch did this to you."

He lowers his mouth to my ear and breathes the word, "Yes."

When our eyes lock again, his have gone dark, the blue nearly swallowed by black. Something in my chest pulls tight and drops low to my core. I can't help but clench my thighs as the same pull I felt against a tree, rushes to my mind. His mouth on me before I'd finished deciding whether to let

him, his beard rough against skin that hadn't felt anyone's attention in years. I'd thought I managed just fine on my own since Gael. But since getting a feel of Alaric on me, I know I was delusional to think I was satisfying myself. Standing here now, my body aching to feel him inside me, I don't think anything could stop me from taking what I want.

"I need you, but I don’t trust you." I stare straight into his eyes trying to verbalize the logic since my mind is only filled with what he could possibly taste like.

He gives me a slight grin and growls, “You shouldn’t trust me.” He clenches his hand resting at his side, restraining himself from touching me and his words should make me back away. Should have every alarm bell I've spent years perfecting going off... instead they pull me closer. "You think you can fuck with me?" I mean it as a threat. It doesn't come out as one. It comes out as a soft breath passing over his lips, a hair's distance apart now, all the heat behind the words gone somewhere else entirely.

"Yes I do." His lips crash to mine and I accept them greedily.

He pulls back only far enough to look at me. "This won't mean anything tomorrow. Say it." His eyes are pleading.

"I'm not asking you for tomorrow, Alaric," I say. "I'm in this moment, not looking for another. I'm just done pretending I don't want you, at least for one night." I smirk up at him.

His hands grip on my hips and pull me against him. His hard length pushes against my lower stomach and a gasp escapes me. I need to feel his thickness in my hand but he bends slightly and slides his rough hands lower cupping my ass and gripping hard. “Right… just to get it out of our system.” His low voice sends shocks to my core.

“Right.” My nipples are so tight straining through my shirt desperate for contact. In a split second, he hoists me up and my legs instantly wrap around his waist, his hardness now at my center forcing a moan from me. He swallows my sound as his lips come to mine. I hear the door close as he turns us to his bed.

This is probably an unwise decision but there is something in me that just cannot be reasoned with. I am pulled to him unlike any before. I gave up the feeling of what it meant to be loved by Gael, though I still remember the beginning. Defending me with the king of Cadryn that I didn’t know what I was before my power burst out at eighteen, the secret check-ins and surprise little gifts I would find by him, I had only known my father to be kind and

meeting Gael was like I got to see glimpses of him again. Our bond grew and we married.

But this need in me now? Never.

With me still wrapped around Alaric’s waist, he slides his hands under my shirt and up my back. I already have no bra so when he lays me down on the bed, he pulls my shirt over my head at the same time, I just needed to get my thick warm leggings off. The chill hit my skin like knives but only for a second before Alaric is on me.

His lips instantly find my nipple at the same time his other hand is full with my other tit. His tongue causes my back to arch off the bed in a silent plea for more. I grip his strong masculine shoulders and use my feet to push off his towel. His laugh causes vibrations on my chest and I need to feel him on my neck again. As I try to direct him to move up he stops completely, “I have to make it even.” His low laugh so close to my skin sends goosebumps down my arms and then my other nipple most definitely is not left out.

He moves to kiss every inch of my skin until he reaches that spot just below my ear and my toes curl. He now is almost fully on top of me and I can feel his length pushing at my entrance. I can't help but squirm lower, craving the feel of him. He holds himself back exactly enough that I can’t move down any lower and I can’t take this teasing much longer. I grab him, and he lets out a low growl as I guide him against my slit, teasing myself with exactly how much I'm not letting him in yet. His moan almost undoes me. I use every bit of strength I've built into my legs, and with my arms helping twist him, I flip him quickly onto his back with me now straddling him and I give him a wink.

He looks in shock for a moment and then it disappears into a dark, sinful stare, “You will be the death of me, Ruin.” I sit back slowly feeling his head once again at my entrance. His hands grip my ass and pull me down on him hard. I see stars instantly, no breath left in my lungs, my mouth open in shock, I feel his low moan move across my face and I instinctively grab his lower lip between my lips and suck, biting just a little before I release him.

We find our rhythm, slow at first letting myself get adjusted to his sheer size but it doesn't take long for my body to remember this feeling. I rock my hips forward and back, faster and harder as his groan becomes impossible to contain. I can’t tell where he starts and I end as we are wrapped up fully into one another. I could stay here forever. It’s as if I was meant to be here

at this time at this place exactly with him. I tell myself, it’s not because of Alaric, this need is just instinctual. But as I feel his strong body beneath me and his piercing eyes full of hunger staring straight into my soul, it’s as if the stars have aligned.

He is who I am meant to be with at this moment.

He grips my ass, moving me faster, back and forth on top of him, matching my pace. Then he uses his strength to push himself deeper still, his lips capturing mine, tongue forcing my lips apart. I can't hold it any longer. Lightning flashes behind my eyes, running all the way down my spine.

I clench around him hard as he finishes inside me in the same instant, and I refuse to let him go. We ride it out together, lost in this moment.

Breathing heavily, he reaches up and gently kisses my lips. It takes me by surprise. It doesn't make sense. This moment already felt intimate, but not the delicate, gentle-kiss kind of intimate. It feels scary and exposing. I am frozen in place as he lays his head back down, wrapping a hand around the back of my head, pulling me gently down to lie on his chest.

“You are breathtaking, Ruin.”

I move off and slide next to him, resting my head on his chest. “Not so bad yourself.” I smirk up at him, but his face remains in awe. His eyes shine with a tenderness I don’t recognize as he leans down to kiss me gently again. He sits back and starts playing with the strands of my hair which causes all my apprehensions to melt away. I listen to his heartbeat. I see the burn scar on his forearm and feel a pull to start tracing the edge. He doesn’t pull away but doesn’t give me an explanation. I don’t push because that would be intrusive and I don’t want him to put his wall up right now. It feels good just being like this as the fire dies down to embers crackling in the quiet room.

"Why do you call me that?" I ask eventually. "Ruin."

He could deflect. He's done it before, every time I've asked, some half joke about the word suiting me better than my own name. He doesn't do that tonight.

"The night I saw you," he says, "on that ridge outside Cadryn. Before you knew I was watching. I saw what you did to those three men, and then I saw you turn around and become someone else entirely for my benefit, soft and frightened and perfectly composed, like flipping a coin. I knew right then what you were underneath all of it."

"And what was I?"

"Something calm on the surface and absolutely lethal underneath. Something that doesn't ask permission before it takes everything from a person." He looks down at me, and there's no performance in his face either now, nothing hidden. "I knew, looking at you, that you were going to destroy me."

"And now," I ask.

"Now you have." He says it plainly, no softness left to hide behind. "I don't know how to stop wanting you, and I have tried. I had a mission that made sense before I met you, and none of it matters to me anymore the way it should. You've ruined every part of it. Every part of me that was supposed to be simple."

Mission. Not the word he used in that alley, standing in the snow telling me about sun and desert and a few months of leave. I catch it the way I catch every small crack in a story, and I tuck it away with everything else I haven't decided what to do with yet. Not tonight. Tonight I don't want the truth badly enough to go looking for it.

"I don't know what love is supposed to feel like anymore," I say finally, quiet, more honest than I mean to be. "I lost the memory of what it felt like with Gael. I only know I had it once. I can't give you that, Alaric. I don't have it to give."

"I'm not asking you for it."

"You will," I whisper. "Eventually. Everyone does."

He doesn't argue with me. He just pulls me closer, and I let him, and outside the window the snow keeps falling over a kingdom I still haven't told him I already know is lying to me too.

OceanofPDF.com



CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

Alaric

I wake before she does, which almost never happens anymore.

The fire's burned down to nothing and the window's gone pale blue with early light, and Rynn's asleep against my chest, her hair loose across both of us, dark, but not solid dark, threads of honey catching the morning light I've never noticed before. I don't move. Three weeks of wanting her, and it took until last night to finally have her, and now that I have, some part of me wants to stay exactly here long enough that neither of us has to be anything but this.

She stirs eventually, her body going still first, checking the room, before she lets herself relax back into me.

"Morning." Her rough voice goes straight to my dick, and I put my lips on her in slow, gentle brushes. Her velvet lips will be the end of me.

"Morning, Ruin." She lifts an eyebrow, and in one motion she's straddled over me, a soft moan escaping as her center lands on my hardness. I lift into her, grabbing her hips, sliding her over me.

"As much as I'd love to be inside you right now, we have a date with a king."

She groans dramatically, pulling a laugh out of me. I flip her onto her back, holding her arms above her head with one of mine. "Next time, I'll fuck you so hard you'll be begging me to stop."

She pushes up onto her elbows, her breath against my lips, mine parting instinctively, ready to consume her.

"Next time," she closes the distance and kisses me for a moment longer before adding, “we will see who does the begging.”



Rynn doesn't look at Nidmeh long as we head out of the inn. Just a simple nod toward her, a promise to see her soon, and guilt punches me in the stomach. Deliver her to Maerek. By any means necessary. The words still surface uninvited, even now.

The square outside is already busy this early, Woken moving through the cold unbothered, breath fogging in short clean bursts. Rynn's face has already changed by the time we clear the door, chin lifted, shoulders settled into something soft and composed, the version of her built for strangers, warm, easy, already asking questions before anyone thinks to ask her one. I've watched her put that face on a hundred times now and I still don't fully understand how fast she does it.

I spot Davon before he spots us, leaning against the wall of a bakery two doors down with a cup in each hand and the corner of his mouth already tugged up like he's found something to laugh at before anyone's said a word.

"There she is." He pushes off the wall, offers her one of the cups.

"No, thank you." Her voice comes out warm, easy, entirely unbothered, nothing underneath it that a stranger could catch. She doesn't so much as glance at what's in his hand.

Davon cocks his head, studying her a beat too long for it to just be manners. "The Touched doesn't drink coffee?"

Something flickers behind her eyes, quick, gone before it fully lands. "How did you know I'm the Touched?" Her voice is gentle and curious without heat behind it but I can see the fight in her eyes.

"Honey." He grins, wide and unbothered, like the question itself is the funniest thing he's heard all week." Anyone in a five mile radius could feel that off you. Longer, if the wind's right. It's not exactly subtle."

She looks to me. Just a flicker, barely anything, but I catch it, the silent request for context before she decides how much of herself to hand over to a stranger.

"Rynn," I say. "This is Davon."

"Davon." She repeats slowly as she tries to place his name. "One of your friends, right?"

"His only friend, if we're being accurate." Davon's grin doesn't waver, but something behind it slips, just slightly. "Heard a great deal about you.” The green in his eyes sparkles at her.

My eyes cut to him hard enough that he should feel it. *What the fuck are you doing.*

If Rynn catches the exchange, she doesn't show it. "How have you heard of me? The Kingdoms aren't exactly friendly with each other."

Davon doesn't miss a beat, stepping in to loop his arm through hers, easy and familiar, like he's done it a hundred times with a hundred different women and none of them have ever minded. She doesn't pull away. I know she'd bristle at anyone else touching her like that without asking, but I've watched enough Solennes to know she's spent a lifetime letting men like Davon think they're charming her, and letting them believe it costs her nothing.

"Of course people know who you are." His voice drops, quieter now, something underneath the charm that doesn't quite match his grin. "The only Touched in two hundred years. Beautiful. Stunning. Thoroughly alluring." A beat, like he's deciding whether to say the rest. "And if half of what I've heard is true, a great deal more than that."

Rynn studies him a moment, something calculating behind the warmth she's still wearing for his benefit. Whatever she decides about it, she doesn't ask. Not here, not with half the square close enough to overhear, and not from a man she's known for exactly four minutes.

"Careful," she says with a soft smile, "flattery like that usually means someone wants something."

"Everyone wants something." Davon's grin comes back easy, like he's relieved she let it go as easily as she did. "I'm just more honest about it than most."

"You didn't bring a coffee for Alaric?" she says, now holding the coffee he brought her.

"Alaric doesn't do coffee. Alaric only does black tea and disappointment, same as always." Davon grins at me over her shoulder. "Isn't that right."

"It's been that way since we were nine," I say, desperate to get the topic off of me. “Seems you’ve kept up on your workouts." I punch him in the arm for emphasis.

“Well one of us has to stay fit for the ladies.” Shoots me a wink and jabs his thumb in my direction telling Rynn, "Notice how he changed the subject there." Davon drops onto the bench outside the bakery like he owns it, waving us down beside him.

"My man Alaric has the hardest time seeing the bright side. That's why he has me. One time, he sulked for a week because I got extra bread at the barracks and he didn't. A whole week. Over bread."

"It was good bread."

"It was stale bread that had been sitting out since morning."

"It was still better than what we usually got."

Davon looks at Rynn like he's found a co-conspirator. "This is a man who once told an entire training yard he'd rather die than lose a sparring match, and meant it, and then cried over bread."

"I didn't cry."

"You cried."

"I did not cry."

Rynn's watching this with the poise and eloquence of a gentle flower. But I know she is keenly aware of every word, cataloging all of it. There's the smallest curve at the corner of her mouth, the kind she doesn't let anyone see unless she's decided it's safe. A real smile... almost.

"How long have you two known each other?" She asks.

"Since before either of us had a say in it." Davon's voice doesn't change exactly, but something underneath it does, some of the humor thinning out even as the smile stays. "Training yard, age nine or ten. King's men don't ask if you want to be there. They just take you, and then they see what's left of you a few years later."

“And what was left of you?”

“Him.” Davon nods at me without looking away from her. “That's the honest answer. Whatever I am now, most of it's because a scrawny kid with round ears and storm magic strong enough to make grown soldiers nervous decided I was his to look out for. Still don't know what he actually is. Nobody does. Man's a walking question mark with better sword work than sense.”

"I have better sword work than sense?" I say. "You're not wrong."

"That's what they tell me." He leans down, lowering his voice to Rynn's ear, "Gotta watch this one," he gestures to me, "can't let his head get too big. It's already hard enough getting him through doorways."

Rynn laughs. Not the practiced version she gives rooms full of strangers, something shorter and more real, gone as fast as it comes, and something in my chest does a flip at the sound of it.

"They put us through things I'm not going to describe over breakfast," he says instead, easier now, "because some of it isn't fit for present company, and some of it I've decided years ago is funnier if I don't examine it too closely. We survived it. Some didn't. The ones who did came out either broken or completely unbothered, and somehow the two of us ended up on opposite sides of that particular coin."

"Which side are you," Rynn asks.

"Unbothered." He says it instantly, grinning. "Deeply, professionally unbothered."

A cart's set up a few paces off, some early vendor already working the square, and Rynn peels away toward it without asking, the way she does most things.

Davon watches her go, then turns to me, all the humor draining out fast enough that I almost don't recognize his face underneath it.

"The king's been waiting since dawn. He's not going to stay patient much longer." He keeps his voice low, quick. "We need to move once she's done."

I nod, already glancing toward the cart, toward the line of her shoulders bent over whatever she's buying.

Davon follows the look and something shifts behind his eyes. "Gods, look at her." He says it low, almost to himself. "We don't have women like that up north. Not built like that. Not looking like the whole desert decided to walk around in one body."

Something tightens in my chest, fast and ugly, and I clench my jaw hard.

Davon catches it. His grin comes back, slower this time, calculating. "You didn't."

I don't answer.

"You did." He drags a hand down his face. "Alaric... Alaric. I know exactly what you were thinking, I'd have thought the same thing, but she's for the king. You understand that, right? You understand what he does to men who touch things that belong to him? That binding on your arm isn't decoration, Alaric." His eyes went wide, staring at me in question.

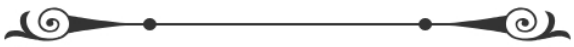
I still don't answer. There's nothing to say that doesn't make it worse.

Rynn's already walking back toward us, a bundle of something warm wrapped in cloth in each hand, and Davon straightens fast, the grin sliding

back into place like he never dropped it at all.

"Ready?" she asks.

"Ready," Davon says, and doesn't look at me again the whole walk to the gates.



The castle rises out of the snow the way everything in this city does, cold, deliberate, built to remind you exactly how small you are standing in front of it. Davon peels off ahead of us at the gate, already switching into something more formal, spine straightening, the easy humor from breakfast folding itself away somewhere I can't see.

"I'll get us announced," he says. "Give me a few minutes."

Rynn watches him go. "He's good at that."

"At what."

"Becoming someone else the second it's useful." She says it without judgment, just an observation. "It’s a useful skill."

I catch her arm before she follows him through, pulling her toward the alcove just off the main gate, out of the wind and mostly out of sight and she looks at me expectantly.

I've had this since before I ever set foot in Cadryn. Maerek pressed it into my hand himself, the last thing he said to me before I left, and I told myself then it was just a precaution, something I'd probably never need. That this is temporary. That once we're through with the king, his witch can finally remove this curse from my arm, none of it will matter anymore. I'll tell her everything, and she'll understand why I couldn't yet.

I take it out anyway.

A thin chain, and at the end of it a stone the color of something caught mid-storm, pale green shot through with darker threads that swirl and never quite settle, like smoke trapped the moment before it dissipates. It looks like it's still moving if you watch it long enough.

"I got this for you."

She looks at it. Then at me. "I thought we weren't going to mean anything to each other tomorrow."

I look at her, the honey in her eyes gone deep and red at the edges, the way it does when something in her isn't as calm as her face wants me to believe. "Ruin. I lied." The word comes out steady enough, but inside I'm cracking. "I've been drawn to you since the beginning. Now that I've had you, tasted you, I can't let you go. Not fully."

She stares at me without saying a word and I see her mask fall. I step closer, close enough to smell her. I can't place just one simple smell but a multitude of scents from the realm. Salt and earth and open sky all at once, like she's carrying a little of everywhere with her. "You're like something I can't stop needing more of, no matter how much I already have. I need more." I move around her and she stands still allowing me to slide her hair over her shoulder and I kiss gently under her ear that makes her melt.

She lets me fasten it. The stone settles at her throat and she touches it gently with shaky hands as if this is the most precious gift. Something in my chest goes tight and ugly with what I'm choosing not to tell her.

She'll be fine, I tell myself, King Maerek has no reason to hurt her outright. She's valuable. Valuable things get kept, not destroyed. And if it comes to it, I'll be standing right there. Maerek will want to know what's happening with Drenoch and I'll ask him to let me lead this myself, tell him Drenoch's already moving North, tell him he needs someone who knows the terrain and knows her, someone he trusts, and he'll agree, because it's the smart move, because I've never once given him reason to think I wouldn't finish a job.

I've built entire arguments in my head for weeks now, each one more convincing than the last, each one quietly ignoring the same simple fact sitting underneath all of it. I know exactly what that necklace does. I know exactly why Maerek pressed it into my hand before I ever left Korreth. And I have spent this whole journey telling myself a story where none of that means what I already know it means.

She doesn't feel anything change. That's the worst part. She just looks up at me, entirely unaware that something essential just went quiet in her chest, and smiles the smile that isn't the one she gives strangers. One I have never seen before. Her real smile.

"It's beautiful," she says.

"Yes you are."

Davon's voice carries from the doors ahead, calling us forward, and Rynn steps past me into the wind without waiting, and I follow her toward the

palace with the necklace settled cold and heavy against her throat, and I do not let myself think, not once, about what I am about to let happen to her on the other side of those doors.

We walk through them together.

OceanofPDF.com

CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

Alaric

The throne room is built to make a person feel small, and it does its job on everyone who walks through those doors except her.

Rynn's face has gone smooth and composed the second we crossed the threshold, chin level, shoulders loose, every inch of her arranged like she's walked into rooms exactly like this a hundred times before and found them boring. I don't know where she learned to do that, or how long it took her to get this good at it, but I know enough to recognize a mask when I see one, and this is easily the best I've ever watched anyone wear.

The vaulted ceiling stretches high enough to swallow the torchlight before it reaches the top, carved with the names of kings long dead. The floor's polished to a black mirror, throwing gold light back up in long streaks. Guards line both walls, twelve of them, and I know every single one by name.

I trained half of them myself. Fought beside the rest more times than I can count. Some of them have homes somewhere in this city, wives, children, a bed that isn't a barracks cot. I never did. The Shadow Guard has been the only home I've had since my father decided a debt was worth more than a son, and for twenty years these men are the only family I know.

I feel the charge coming off them the way I always do in this room, old habit, old training, counting exits before I've decided to. It doesn't mean anything tonight. Just a room full of men I've bled beside, watching another prisoner get brought in, same as they've watched a hundred times before.

Rynn's hand drifts to her throat once, absent, adjusting the necklace like it's caught on something. My stomach turns over.

Nox, I hear her say, not to me, just the ghost of the shape her mouth makes when she reaches for the bond. I watch her reach again a second later, more deliberately this time.

Nothing happens on her face. That's the part that guts me. If it were anyone else, I'd see the fear land. On her, there's nothing. Just the faintest stillness, a held breath she doesn't let go of, and then the mask settles back exactly where it was.

She doesn't know yet. She's about to.

Maerek is already on the dais when we enter, seated, unhurried, flanked by two men in dark counsel robes I don't recognize. Behind his throne stands the witch, hands folded, eyes down, the posture of someone who has learned exactly how much space she's allowed to take up.

Guards fall in behind us as we cross the floor, not touching, just present, boots matching our pace like an escort that's already decided we're not walking back out the way we came in.

Rynn curtseys when we reach the base of the dais, the perfect depth, the perfect restraint, and when she rises, her chin comes up level with the king's, and she holds his eyes without blinking, without a single trace of the deference the gesture just offered him.

Maerek doesn't say anything. He watches her a long moment, then gives the smallest nod to the guard at her left.

It happens too fast for her to stop it. Cuffs, cold iron, closed around both wrists before she finished registering the guard's hand moving.

She doesn't freeze. Her leg comes up and catches him square in the stomach, hard enough to send him stumbling back three full steps, hard enough that he doubles over gasping for air he can't quite find.

For one second, her mark flares under her skin, deep red climbing her collarbone, and my whole chest goes tight watching it happen, some hope that maybe the cuffs won't hold, maybe this ends differently than I already know it does.

Then it goes out. Snuffed, all at once, like someone closed a hand around a candle.

Maerek looks pleased. Not surprised. Pleased, the specific satisfaction of a man watching a very expensive purchase perform exactly as advertised.

Rynn's eyes find mine.

What the fuck. Help me.

I don't move. I can't. I stand there and let her see exactly what I am, and something in my face must answer her, because the fury in her eyes cracks, just for a second, into something rawer and more frightened underneath it, and one tear breaks loose and runs the length of her cheek before she catches it, before the mask tries and fails to climb back into place.

Maerek descends the dais steps.

I kneel. Head down, the posture I've given this man ten thousand times since I was a child too young to understand what kneeling cost, and when he stops in front of me I feel the weight of his attention like a hand on the back of my neck.

"Rise."

I do.

His eyes drop, briefly, to my forearm. To the sleeve I haven't bothered rolling down, the mark visible past my wrist now, climbing higher than it was three weeks ago.

"Wrist to elbow already." He says it almost fondly, the way you'd remark on a child growing out of last year's boots. "You work fast, boy. I'll give you that."

Something in my chest goes cold and still.

Rynn's eyes flick to my arm. Just once.

"You knew," she hisses. Not to me. To him.

"Of course I knew." Maerek's voice stays pleasant, almost bored. "I put it there." He smirks, flashing a wicked smile.

“Now that you have her… will you now release this curse from my blood, my King? I have fulfilled your request and brought you the Touched.”

I hear Rynn gasp but I keep my eyes on the King.

"Patience, Alaric.” He turns to Rynn. “So," his hands clasp behind his back, circling her slowly. "This is what a Touched looks like," he says, "when one's finally allowed to see twenty-six."

"You said the witches were tolerated here." Rynn's voice comes out low and furious, meant for me even as she keeps her eyes on the king. "Safe. Left alone, as long as they kept west. That's what he told me."

"He told you a great many things, I imagine." Maerek's smile doesn't waver. “That’s why he is my High Shadow. There is no one quite like him and this job was not one to give to anyone lesser.”

Something in Rynn's face goes still in a way that's worse than the tears. I watch her put it together in real time, everything, the witches, the collars, the lie about my leave and the desert and wanting to feel the sun, all of it collapsing at once into a single, ugly shape she's only now allowed herself to see.

She doesn't look at me again.

“I’m flattered.” The fire in Rynn’s eyes makes Maerek step back.

Her jaw tightens and the cuffs flare gold in response, the binding worked into the iron straining against something building beneath her skin. Her mark ignites, deep red climbing fast up both arms, past her collarbone, brighter than it was a moment ago, and this time it doesn't just flicker.

It holds.

The magic in the cuffs strains audibly, a high metal groan, and for one full second I watch Maerek's satisfaction crack open into something else entirely.

Fear.

It's there and gone so fast I might have imagined it if I hadn't spent twenty years learning to read this man's face for exactly this kind of thing. The mark goes out a heartbeat later, snuffed by whatever's containing her, but the damage to Maerek's composure doesn't recover as fast as his expression tries to.

He takes a step back. Toward the dais. Toward the throne, like putting distance between himself and her matters more right now than looking like a king who isn't afraid of anything.

"Kill her," he commands.

The words land strange in the room, too fast, too raw to be the calm administrative order I expected from him. He's already climbing the first step back up to the throne as he says it, not looking at either of us anymore.

"Quickly. Before whatever that was finds a way through."

The room goes very quiet.

I don't move.

The blood curse answers where I don't. It's instant, a line of fire dragging itself up from my wrist, faster than it's ever grown, and I understand with perfect clarity that it isn't a suggestion this time, it's a leash pulling taut, and every second I don't obey it, it tightens further.

My hand pulls the blade from its sheath without my permission, some dark magic in me already deciding this, and fear rips through my chest hard

enough to steal the air out of it.

No.

Not her. Not like this.

Guards move in closer but hesitant, since I am their commander. I have fought every one of them and they have never gotten the upper hand. I can’t do this. She's the first breath of clean air I've had in all my life, and I don't know how I can survive now that she has walked into it. I’ve felt her, tasted her, she is a part of me that I cannot break free of. She is unlike anything I have met… cold, ruthless, merciless to anyone who's earned it, and somehow still the fairest, most fiercely loyal thing I've ever stood next to. She is more alive than anything I've touched in this entire castle, in this entire life, and I am not going to be the reason that stops.

This curse might kill me for what I'm about to do. It probably will.

I don't care what a life without her in it costs me, only that she gets to keep having one. Even if it's not beside me. Even if she never forgives me for any of this, which she won't, which she shouldn't.

I can’t move much but I stare down the king and he can see the fight in my strained body, pushing against his order. Maerek's face does something I've never seen on him. Surprise, then something uglier underneath it. He glances once at the witch standing near the dais steps, the one who put this thing in my arm to begin with, and then back at me, and when he speaks his voice has lost its pleasant edge entirely.

"You are not strong enough to withstand my power, boy." He straightens, and the whole room seems to straighten with him, the air gone taut enough to feel against my skin. "I will bring a storm bigger than anything you can summon and tear you down to nothing."

Something breaks loose in my chest instead, a growl low enough that I feel it in my teeth before I hear it in my own voice.

"I am the storm."

I came here with a plan. It broke the second our eyes met on that ridge, and I've just been too much of a coward to admit it until right now.

I take one step, turning my back to her, and push back against the strain holding me hostage, a scream trying to climb out of my own arm.

It comes out of me like something physical, a burst of pressure that rolls off my skin and through the room, guttering half the torches along the wall, and for one full second everyone in that room goes still, even Maerek, even the guards, even Rynn.

The binding doesn't fully break. I feel that much clearly, feel it still wound tight around my arm, itching, burning. But whatever held my body locked to his will a moment ago has slipped, just slightly, just enough.

Enough to move.

I turn to Rynn and close my fist around the hilt of Rynn's dagger sheathed at her thigh, the one forged in dragon fire, and bring it down hard against the shackles at her wrists. They break clean.

She might gut me for this. Some cold, distant part of me thinks that's fair, thinks I'd rather take a blade from her than spend one more second being the reason she's chained to anything.

I press the dagger into her hand anyway.

"Fight," I demand.

She doesn't ask questions. Now is not the time. Her hands close around the hilt and something in her face changes entirely, the calm gone, the mask gone, nothing left but teeth bared and her adara smeared where sweat's already cutting through the ochre and black. Her hair's loose, wild around her face, and when she roars at the guard closest to her it isn't fear in the sound. It's a promise.

We fight.

The guard closest to her hasn't fully processed what's happening, still reeling from the boom that dropped half the room, and she doesn't give him time to catch up. The dagger goes into his eye before he's finished raising his sword, clean and fast, and she twists it once before she pulls it free, and the sound that comes out of him isn't a scream so much as something wet and final. He falls back down, this time for good.

The second guard's already moving on her, and she pivots into it instead of away, her boot connecting hard with his knee from the side. It gives with a crack loud enough to hear over everything else, and he goes down screaming, one leg folded wrong beneath him.

Blood's on her hands, on her face, dark against the ochre and black smeared across her cheekbones, breathing hard not from exertion but anger, she stands near me facing the guards waiting for someone to strike.

Maerek screams at the shadow guard to kill her and then I feel it happen through the room, something enormous and quiet snapping back into place, and I know, without needing to see her face, that she's found the bond again. She drops the necklace on the floor and smashes it with her heel.

Nox.

I don't hear her say it. I just watch her shoulders drop half an inch, the smallest release, the kind of relief a person only shows when they think no one's paying close enough attention to notice.

She turns to the king and becomes something else entirely, “I think it's time you run.” She smiles at Maerek and the guards charge us.

The first one comes at me because his training tells him to, not because he wants to. I know that the second our eyes meet. Bren. I taught him to hold a blade before his hands were big enough to properly close around one, watched Maerek's men beat the hesitation out of him one welt at a time until following orders became the only shape left in him.

He is a stone wielder and the same moment he flings a stone toward me, he swings his sword. I don't have the luxury of hoping he pulls back.

I take the blow on my forearm instead of my throat, and the pain of it barely registers against everything else already burning through that arm. I put my blade into his side before he can recover his stance, and he makes a sound I've heard a hundred times on a training yard when someone's pushed too hard, except this time it doesn't stop when the drill ends. The heavy stone he threw lands on another guard smashing him beneath it and the fire he wielded with him.

"I'm sorry," I whisper to Bren as I slide him back off my sword, and I don't know if he hears it before he goes down.

There's no time to feel anything about it. Another one's already coming, Tobin, who used to trade me his portion of bread for first watch because he hated mornings more than he hated hunger, and I put him down too, blade finding the gap between plates at his shoulder, and the blood that comes out of him is hot enough that I feel it through my sleeve.

I don't stop moving. If I stop moving, I start thinking, and if I start thinking, then I don't survive this room.

I see Rynn at my side and I am in awe of her. I've fought beside her before, in the tunnels, on the ridge, but I've never seen this, not really, not with nothing left to hide behind and no mask worth keeping. She takes the wrist of the guard nearest her and turns his own weight against him, puts him into the man behind him, and has a blade in her hand I never saw her draw. She doesn't hesitate once. She doesn't look like she's thinking at all, and I understand, watching her, that this is the version of her that survived eleven years alone before any of us ever met her, the one she's spent this entire journey keeping carefully out of sight.

A third comes from my left, someone I don't have time to place a name to before instinct decides for me, blade meeting blade meeting bone, and when he drops I finally let myself look at what's around me, at men I've eaten beside, trained beside, bled beside for most of my life, on the ground now because a king who owns all of us and takes whatever he wants.

None of them chose this. Not really. Not the whipping pole that built them, not the threats on their families or the orders that move their hands, not one single piece of the men they became under Maerek's roof. I know that better than anyone standing in this room, because I am exactly what they are, just the version of it that got lucky enough to fall in love with someone worth breaking the leash for.

I don't feel like I got lucky right now. I feel like I'm burying my own life one body at a time, everything slows down around me while I'm pitted against men who never stood a chance. Stronger. Faster. More precise with my power than any of them. A lion turned loose in a flock of sheep, and I don't want this, but I can't stop it either.

Another guard hesitates in front of me, blade half-raised, and for one terrible second I see the exact moment he decides whether tonight's the night he finally stops obeying too. I don't wait to find out. I can't afford the mercy of waiting, not with Rynn's back somewhere behind mine and a room full of men who'll cut her down the second I give any of them the opening.

He goes down like the rest.

I don't count how many. I refuse to let myself count. Counting means remembering names, and remembering names means understanding, in specific, unbearable detail, exactly what Maerek made me do to the only family a life like mine ever gave me.

Maerek's shouting something. Orders, probably, though I've stopped listening to him the way I've stopped listening to the mark burning up my arm. Both of them are just noise now, background to the only thing that matters, getting her out of this room alive.

Davon appears from the direction of the north door, already bloody. He takes two guards apart with an efficiency that would be beautiful if I had time to appreciate it, sword in one hand, a short blade in the other, and when his eyes find mine across the chaos there's nothing playful left in them at all. My heart swells at the sight of him, my brother by choice, like something in him has finally broken free of whatever hold Maerek had on both of us.

"Door," he indicates.

"I see it."

"Now, Alaric."

We go. Rynn moves ahead of me, cutting a line through anything that gets close enough to matter, and I follow her. Behind us the throne room is loud with moans and shouts as Maerek's voice rises above the rest, promising something none of us stay long enough to hear the end of.

The corridor beyond the throne room is narrow and torch-lit, sloping down toward the outer wall, and behind us the noise doesn't fade so much as scatter, shouting breaking into smaller shouting, chaos looking for a direction to run in.

Davon reaches the junction first and stops.

"Left," he whispers. "Postern gate, quarter mile out. Horses are already there."

Rynn doesn't slow. "You're coming."

"In a minute." Something in his voice has gone flat, older than the version of him that bought her coffee this morning. "Maerek's going to want someone to blame loudly and immediately, and it works better for both of you if that someone isn't running alongside you when the search parties go out."

"Davon." My voice comes out rougher than I mean it to.

"I know what I'm doing." He looks at me, and for one second everything easy about him drops away entirely, and what's underneath it is something I recognize because I've felt it myself, right before a decision closes and there's no taking it back. "I have the rank to buy this. A commander who stumbled onto a breach in the south wing, dealt with it personally, chased the rest of the intruders toward the east wall instead of the postern gate. They'll believe it long enough to matter."

"He'll know it was us."

"He'll suspect." Davon's jaw sets. "There's a difference, and the difference is time. Get her out. That's the whole job right now. Go."

Rynn's looking at him, not quite trusting and definitely not gratitude, but more careful than either, the look of someone doing rapid math on whether a stranger's sacrifice is one she's allowed to accept.

"Why," she asks.

"Because this idiot saved me." He shakes his head, then softens his tone. "Taught me what family was, even when neither of us had one. Always had

my back." Davon says, nodding at me, "and because he looks at you like there might be something worth surviving all this for, and I'd like to see how that turns out." He grins, and it almost reaches his eyes this time. "Go on. Before I change my mind and decide I'd rather come with you and let Maerek burn the whole city down looking for all three of us."

I don't move. Some part of me is still standing in that throne room, still feeling the mark's teeth in my arm, still furious at every version of this plan that involves leaving him behind in a building full of men who answer to a king who's about to want blood.

"Alaric." Rynn's hand closes around my wrist. Not pulling. Just there. "We have to go."

I look at Davon one more time. He's already turned half away from us, already turning back into the version of himself that talks his way out of anything, and I think for a split second what it would be like if he didn’t have to pretend to be who he’s not anymore.

"I'll come back for you," I tell him.

"I know you will." He doesn't turn around to say it. "Try not to die on your way out."

We run.

The snow outside hits harder than it did this morning, coming sideways now, finding every gap in my jacket, and Rynn moves through it like she's barely feeling the cold at all, blood on her hands and her breath coming fast and even, nothing left of the smiling, composed woman who walked into that throne room an hour ago.

Nox is already waiting when we clear the outer wall, wings half-spread, and Rynn doesn't slow down for any of it, running the last stretch and swinging up onto his back like she's done it a thousand times, like her body knows the motion better than her mind does right now.

I follow her. I don't think about doing anything else.

Nox's head turns before I've fully closed the distance, and the sound that comes out of his throat isn't a warning. I feel it vibrate my bones, the sound is so deep my body is ordering me to run. His jaw opens and I see the fire building behind his teeth, bright enough to throw orange light across the snow between us.

I stop walking.

I understand, watching that light build, exactly what's about to happen, and some distant, exhausted part of me finds it almost fitting. I spent this

entire journey lying to her, to myself, to every version of the future I let myself imagine, and now the only creature in this world who's ever put her first is going to end me.

I don't run.

Rynn doesn't stop him.

She doesn't look at me either, not really, her eyes fixed somewhere past my shoulder, jaw tight, and one single tear tracks down through the blood and paint still smeared across her cheek. She doesn't say my name. She doesn't say Nox's. She just turns her face away, and I understand that for exactly what it is, permission, silent and complete, the door she's choosing not to hold open for me anymore.

I don't blame her for it. I've never once blamed her for anything, and I'm not about to start with the one thing I actually deserve.

The fire builds higher behind Nox's teeth.

"Wait." My voice comes out steadier than I have any right to expect. "I know what you are."

Nox doesn't stop. Not yet. But something in the set of his massive head shifts, some fraction of stillness where there wasn't any a second ago.

Rynn's eyes finally come back to mine.

"I know what a Touched means," I say. "Not the version everyone else believes. The real one."

OceanofPDF.com

EPILOGUE

Ebbin

The glass takes me almost a full minute to collect all the pieces, scattered thin and near-invisible across the dark stone, and my knees ache from crouching by the time I'm satisfied I've gotten the worst of it into the pan.

I'd been in the room when it happened. The king swept the goblet off the table in an angry fit and I've been here long enough to know the right response to a king's fury is to disappear, not to comfort him.

I'd bowed, left and gone for the broom.

My mother was a strong enough witch to be worth keeping for the healing houses but still in chains. I wasn't strong enough for anything but a broom and a pan. *Male witch*, is what they spit at me like a curse. The power in male witches' blood, thins out somewhere between mother and son, present but never quite whole, like a well someone filled halfway and stopped. The king doesn't like that because it's less power he can abuse. I made peace with that a long time ago.

I come back now, with the broom, careful and quiet, the way I've learned to move through every room in this castle since they took me from the western settlements twenty years ago.

The door to the king's private chamber sits open a hand's width, the way I left it.

I haven't gone in yet. A presence in the air stops me at the threshold. I may be weak when it comes to power, but I do have a sense for it.

The king is talking.

I pause and assess before I enter. Something feels off as I press myself into the shadow beside the doorframe, the pan and broom held perfectly still against my chest, and I listen. This is the skill that's kept me alive longer than almost any other before me. Stealth.

"---she was never meant to be handled that way." The king's voice, low, and wrong in a way I can't immediately name. It’s not the voice he uses for petitioners or counsel. Something smaller underneath the words. "I did what I judged necessary. I answer to the realm, not to---"

Silence.

A long silence, the kind that has weight to it, and I realize, the king isn't pausing for effect.

He's listening to someone.

There's no one else in that room. I know that with total certainty now, the same certainty I'd swear to before any court in the realm, because I watched every soul who entered this wing tonight, and none of them are inside.

"I didn't mean---" The king's voice cracks on the second word, and something about the sound of a king's voice cracking makes me freeze. “Ahhhh!” the king shouts in pain, but I don’t move a muscle. "I know what you are. I have never once forgotten what you are or what you're capable of."

Silence again. Longer this time.

"Please." I've never heard King Maerek say that word, begging, I realize.

I risk the smallest movement, tilting my head enough to see through the gap in the door, and what I see stops my breath entirely.

The king is on his knees. Alone, in the middle of his vast, cold bedroom, hands raised in front of him like he's warding off a blow from someone standing close enough to land it, and there is no one there. No one at all. Just Maerek, king of a kingdom that kneels to no one, kneeling to empty air.

"I made a mistake—" the king screams.

The sounds send chills up my spine and my legs want to run but I don't. It goes on longer than a scream should be able to go on, longer than lungs should allow. Then the screams start to have another sound underneath it, wet and terrible, something breaking that isn't bone.

I don't run. Running would mean being seen leaving, and being seen leaving would mean being asked what I saw, and there is no answer to that question that ends with me still breathing tomorrow. I press myself flatter

into the shadow instead and close my eyes and pray to gods who stopped listening to my kind a long time ago, and I wait.

The screaming stops.

The silence that follows is somehow worse.

When I finally make myself look again, the king is on the floor. Not kneeling anymore. Face up, one arm bent wrong beneath him, and the blood's already spreading out from under him in a slow, dark halo across the stone, coming from his eyes, from his nose, leaking thin and steady from both ears.

He is very clearly dead.

I stand in the doorway for a long time, the broom and pan still held against my chest like they might protect me from something. They will think it was me. I was the one assigned here tonight. I must run, but where? I am only a male witch, they will know I cannot do this but I need to be the one to control the story. I leave to go find the nearest guard and I decide, walking the length of the cold corridor, that whatever I heard tonight, whatever I saw kneeling and pleading to nothing at all, I will carry to my own grave and never once repeat.

Some silences keep you alive.

End of Book One

OceanofPDF.com



Dear Reader

Thank you for picking up *The Smiling Dark*. This is my first written book, and it means more to me than words can really capture that you spent your time inside this story.

If you enjoyed, please leave a review on:

AMAZON

GOODREADS

BOOKBUB

I wrote Rynn for every woman who has ever felt thrown around, used up, or unseen. Who has had to survive first and figure out who she is later. This book was my way of using fantasy as an escape, of imagining what it might feel like to stop being something that happens to you, and become the one who decides, the judge, the jury, the one who finally gets to choose. I hope some part of her story finds you exactly where you need it, and reminds you of your own worth, and gives you something to hold onto on the days life tries to knock you down.

Thank you for your support, your love, and for trusting me with your time. I'd love to keep talking about books with you, come find me and say hello.

OceanofPDF.com

FOLLOW ME ON SOCIALS
TikTok: @vex.ashbourne_writes
Instagram: @vex.ashbourne_lifebtcovers

Check out my website!
www.vexashbourne.com

My dream is to have my series set up with special editions! Stay tuned for book 2 of the Beautiful Ruin Series.

With so much gratitude,
Vex Ashbourne

OceanofPDF.com

Acknowledgements

Thank you to my incredible husband, who has always supported me in all my crazy ventures. I wouldn't have been able to do this without your love and support.

Thanks to my two beautiful twins, whom I love with all my heart and who make me proud every day that I am your mom.

To my mom, for always answering the phone when I call, helping me brainstorm, and keeping my spirits up. I can always count on you to keep my creative juices flowing!

Ashley, my younger sister, I love you with all my heart and am so lucky to call you my sister.

To all my incredible book friends I've found on social media during this journey, who help and uplift and are always willing to lend a hand.

I am so incredibly thankful for the life handed to me, no matter how hard it was in the beginning, because it was all worth it for where I am today.

OceanofPDF.com